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# THE KING'S MAIL.



# THE KING'S MAIL.

BY

HENRY HOLL.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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VOL. I.

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HARRILD, TER, LONDON.

## PREFACE.



MY DEAR HAZLITT,—There is an old saying—at least I believe it to be an old saying, but as I have no copy of Ray's Collection of Proverbs to refer to, I must take it for granted that it is, and abide by it accordingly—that “an inch of truth goes further than a yard of fiction.” Whether or not the said “inch of truth” may have conferred so extended a benefit upon me, I am not in a position to judge. It is sufficient for me to know, that having met with “a peg to hang a thought upon,” I took the liberty of suspending three volumes on it, thereby testing its capabilities in a manner which, if it only survive the shock, will create a better opinion of all pegs—past, present, and to come. But how about the “thought”? you may say. Gently, my good friend, and do not drive me in a corner too soon, or what becomes of my three volumes!

And now for the “inch.”

My wife told me—and I trust I am too good a husband to question any of her facts—that once upon a time, and somewhere about the close of the last, or the beginning of the present century, a certain gentleman—and by position and means he *was* a gentleman—was supposed to have been guilty of a trespass against the laws and regulations of his country, which some people may think anything *but* gentlemanly, and committed the felony which, under more extenuating circumstances, is presumed to take place at the end of the first volume, which offence was said to have been discovered after his death, by the same signs and tokens as are set forth in the ninth chapter of the third volume.

Whether such an occurrence ever did, or did not take place, matters little as far as a work of fiction is concerned, although, being “native there and to the manner born,” my fair informant—and I am sure no one will question *this* fact—may be supposed to have a satisfactory knowledge of that portion of Sussex in which my story lies, and be possessed of certain hearsay tales, facts, or scandals belonging to the district.



Stimulated thus far, and having laid hold of the "peg," I lost no time in exploring the country bordering on my locality, and assisted by sundry descriptions, derivable from the old associations and experience of others, drew on my imagination for the rest, sat down to my work, and behold the result !

There were some difficulties to be got over, and certain informations to be arrived at, appertaining to the date of my story, which cost me some time and trouble to surmount, more especially as regarded mail travelling in 1785 ; and I should be most unmindful of an act of courtesy on the part of Lieutenant-Colonel Maberly, if I neglected this opportunity of acknowledging the service he rendered me, by pointing out to my attention certain Reports on Mr. Palmer's Claim, deposited in the Post-office, which I happily obtained a sight of, although by rather a circuitous route. My friend Edward Wright, F.S.A., whose abilities are too well recognized to require any testimony of mine, also assisted me by a variety of old road books ; so that what with one help and another, I arrived as near my point as was necessary, without being too particular as to

facts, or sufficiently indifferent of them to be accused of carelessness. And I should wish it to be distinctly understood, that the then proprietor of "Chase House"—as I have designated it—is in no way to be held responsible for what is here set forth, or be made amenable to censure. The circumstances written of are of the past and gone, only to be regarded in the light of a tale, and cast aside accordingly.

A word of thanks to my friend Wilkie Collins for introducing me to my publishers, and to you for "seeing me through the press," and I have done. But as I am anxious to have at least the sanction of one good name to this my first attempt at novel writing, I would wish to inscribe my book to you, and by so doing place before my work a name illustrious in letters—a name that, while English literature endures, will ever be remembered with affection, and acknowledged with delight.

Yours ever truly,

H. HOLL.

THE GREEN, EALING,

*May, 1863.*

# THE KING'S MAIL.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE CROSS ROADS.

LOUNGING about the entrance of an inn-yard in the quiet, old-fashioned town of Godalming, a group of idlers stood gaping up the narrow way, while—grating from its iron frame, gilt and bedizened, to make it look as much like the real thing as possible—the sign of the “King’s Arms” swung with a quiet sense of dignity about it, as though it only condescended to move to the fine November breeze out of its royal grace, not from any outward pressure on the part of the wind, which came blowing up the High Street, flapping the “Red Lion” until it almost turned him topsy turvy, and, starting the “White Bear” from the one hinge by which he had been swinging all the summer, sent him sprawling into the middle of the road.

Up and down that old inn-yard in the year of grace 1785 walked a tall, sallow-faced man, expostulating in angry terms with the ostler, who, with a whisk of hay in his hand, leant against the stable door indifferent to the traveller's impatience, and not to be put out of his way by him or half-a-dozen like him; while the idlers at the entrance of the yard dived their hands into their pockets as they stood watching the strange man go walking up and down, and would have been content to look at him for another hour at least, delighted with the unusual occupation they had found of whiling away a little of their spare time, which, as a rule, hung rather heavily on their hands.

"He is dead lame, your honour," said the ostler, rubbing himself down with the whisk of hay, as if to keep his hand in.

"The brute had better have broken his neck than fallen lame at a time like this," exclaimed the stranger with an oath, looking savagely out of his dark eyes as though the broken neck would have been more to his liking.

"You must have rode hard, sir. When he came in last night he had hardly a leg to stand on, and is so dead beat he couldn't carry you a mile, to say nothing of a dozen." And the ostler

spoke as though he had quite made up his mind that he couldn't.

An impatient utterance and a few more hasty strides about the yard, instead of having the desired effect of cooling, appeared to increase the traveller's irritation, as he said—

“Rode hard, indeed! If he had been worth his keep, he would have done it easily enough. It is but four and thirty miles, and he baited twice upon the road.”

“Four and thirty miles is a long pull at the rate you rode him,” said the ostler, doggedly, evidently determined to back the horse.

The stranger made no reply, but with an annoyed and disappointed look stood debating with himself what was the best thing to do. A church clock striking eight, roused him from his momentary reverie. Turning hastily towards the ostler he said—

“How am I to get on then? Have you another horse in the stable, anything fit for a gentleman to ride?”

“Nothing but an old broken-winded chaise hack, and she's blind and not over sure-footed; but she's posted 'twixt here and Portsmouth these twenty years, and knows the road well enough if her legs warn't so stiff.”

“Curse you and your hack too!” exclaimed the stranger, turning upon the ostler with anything but a look of affection. Now the ostler did not much care for looks at any time, unless indeed Jane the barmaid had a mind to try her hand at it; then he gave in at once. But there was an expression about the traveller’s eye he had never seen before, a cruel, savage expression, which as suddenly died away the moment he found the eye opposed to his looking angry as his own, as though an innate cowardice prevented his natural malevolence from breaking out too violently. Resuming in a calmer tone, he said—

“You can get me a horse from some of the other inns, can’t you?”

“Not in the whole town, sir. Everything that can drag a leg is off to Guildford Market, and unless you wait for the mail——”

“Wait till one o’clock in the morning and dangle my legs about here, when I ought to be half-way on my road by this. I must walk it, I suppose.” Turning on his heel the stranger strode up to the entrance of the yard, from whence the idlers kept watching him, as if the sight of a passenger in the streets of Godalming were an unusual occurrence, and one they had not seen in all their lives before.

The landlord meanwhile bustled out of the side-door of the inn, and as the stranger paused on the outside looking up the High Street, slashing his boots with his riding whip, in pettish anger at the unforeseen delay that had come upon his journey, made his bow, and with all an inn-keeper's politeness lamented the lameness of his horse and the impossibility of mounting him on any other, it being market-day at Guildford, "but if his honour liked a walk——"

"There is nothing else left for it since that brute of mine has broken down, and your infernal town can't supply another, so the sooner I am off the better. There is no difficulty in finding the way, I suppose?"

"Straight as the crow flies," replied the landlord, bowing even lower than before, and performing an imaginary washing of his hands, as if that necessary operation had been forgotten in his morning's ablutions; "and a good road all the way to Haslemere. It is rather roughish afterwards, I hear folks say, and apt to break your springs bumping along the cart-ruts, but easy enough walking, only a little up and down; but pleasant for all that, and in as wild a part of Sussex as you could find through all the county."

"I must take my chance and get on as well

as I can, but I shall be back to-morrow or the next day, when perhaps that lazy brute of mine will be able to carry me to London. He shall, if spur and whip can make him, or I'll know a reason why."

As the landlord had nothing to urge against this amiable determination on the part of the traveller, he washed his hands again—a habit he had acquired ever since the day his gracious majesty, King George the Third, had stopped to change horses at his own "Royal Arms," and smacked his royal lips over a tankard of home-brewed; and there the precious tankard stood in the coffee-room under a glass shade to keep it safe from common lips, to be gazed at by all true and loyal subjects with a feeling of profoundest awe and speechless veneration.

Bidding the innkeeper "Good morning!" with the worst possible grace, and without even glancing at the illustrious sign-board swaying over his head, the stranger turned down the High Street, evidently desirous of cutting short all further colloquy.

The landlord bowed to his departing guest, wished him a "pleasant walk," then went into his inn again to superintend the domestic economy of the "King's Arms;" while the half-dozen



loungers hanging about the posts at the yard gate dived their hands still deeper into their pockets, as though they could never get to the bottom of them, and looked after the retreating figure in stupified astonishment, wondering how any man who could afford to ride, would walk twelve miles.

“ If I had the drivin’ of him I’d make *him* lame,” exclaimed the ostler, putting his head round the corner of the gate, and wringing his whisk of hay into a long rope-like twist ; but as the ostler could not put his mental driving into operation he contented himself by giving his head a threatening nod on one side, watched the retreating figure out of sight, then went into the stable to look after the lame horse.

The stranger kept on his way at a steady and determined pace, as though he had quite brought his mind to make the best of a bad bargain, and get over his task without loss of time. And as his measured steps sounded through the quiet street, the dozing dogs on the doorsteps, and the owners of the no less quiet shops, opened their eyes, looking at him as he passed in the full belief that some unheard-of wager was about to be decided, or why, in the name of fortune, should any man walk at the rate of four miles an hour, when the usual pace in those parts was but one ? It

was quite certain he did not belong to Godalming —no denizen of that nor of any other country town, being ever known to walk in proper earnest : resting on street posts and in corners as sensible men should, the good townsfolk of that sleeping place crawled along as though walking were an exercise they did not understand, and too active an operation for them to put in practice.

The stranger meanwhile performed the passage of the High Street, passed by the Town Hall, and footed sturdily along until he reached the outskirts of the town. Before him lay the open road high banked with wooded slopes, or set with pleasant hedgerows. The bright morning sun and the crisp November air stimulated him to his walk, which, now he was well set to it, promised to be less wearisome than he had at first imagined. With the sense of unusual freedom about him the stranger journeyed on his way, humming some old air familiar to our grandfathers, and in the full enjoyment of his walk went cheerily along.

He met a country lass when close to the village of Milford, and for a few minutes paused to chat with her, laughing, and talking to her about her sweetheart, and appearing particularly anxious to know when she was to be married, the girl not quite understanding what to make of the fine

London gentleman, who pretended to know all about her and her intended, and talked of them as though he had been acquainted with them all their lives. They parted at last to go upon their different ways, the girl blushing to the ears, and he with a loud ringing laugh turning and looking after her, wondering how it was country girls could blush in the way they did. The road lay straight before him now as he went walking on, sometimes singing, or with his riding whip slashing at the stray brambles hanging from the hedge side. Leaving the scattered houses some way behind, he came at last to the junction of two roads. The one bearing to the left had a red, sandy appearance, and was altogether of a rougher character than the right hand road. Which was he to take? He stood doubting for a while, looking first up one, then the other, then round about him, hoping to light upon some finger-post to decide the question. An old wooden stump stood at the corner of the roads, but time had rotted away the cross pieces, and obliterated the trace of letters. The roads only were there, and which was he to choose?

No one was in sight, no horseman or farmer's cart on either, nor a passing labourer to direct him on his way. Which should he take? The

right hand road was evidently the most used of the two, was broader, and better kept. Should he walk back to those white cottages, and ask? Not he! He would decide by the toss of a guinea; and "heads" won it. He turned on to the right hand road and resumed his walk.

"That ass of a landlord never told me there were two roads; but this looks the right one, and so 'luck's' the word. It has stood my friend before to-day, and must again, or Martin Blakeborough shall smart for it. Yes, my fine spark, you must not forget old friends now you are high in the market, and what's more you shan't, or I am not the man I take myself to be." As he spoke a strange fury shot from his eyes, and slashing his riding whip at everything within his reach, he walked along.

He was out of sight of Milford now, and pacing on the great Portsmouth road came to the broad tract of flat and desolate waste called Hind Head Heath. Stretching for miles away on either side, its bare and dismal aspect seemed to lengthen out the long straight road, reaching in a continuous line to where the broken range of hills rose dark and black before him in the far off view, lowering against the sky. Undulating over that dreary tract the road appeared inter-

minable, crossing as it did right over the frowning heath, its broad space dwindling in the distance to a mere span. There lay his way along that cheerless road, and uttering impatient curses at his horse's lameness, he walked sulkily, yet sturdily along.

He had little to comfort him in his selfish and unpleasant musings, walking over that expanded and uncultivated waste, as with his head bent forward, his arms crossed behind his back, he uttered angry ejaculations; communing with himself at times; then breaking off into imaginary conversations as if with an antagonistic and strong-willed opponent, with whom he appeared to argue, threaten, raising his hand at intervals as if to give yet greater energy to his words; or stepping on to the heath, plucked a faded sprig of heather, tore it between his teeth, or crushed it in his hand, as though that faded sprig possessed some vital energy, some opposing force, which he could trample on and tear to pieces. And at times like these he looked as if he could trample on and could crush anything that stood between him and his desires.

He was now some miles upon his journey, yet still no sign of a farmer's house, or wayside hovel, and he in the midst of that long straight road,

stretching far away, without a living thing to break the dull, monotonous view. Before, behind, nothing but road, and on all sides heath.

A small mound of rough, uneven ground came upon him as a relief in the midst of that dull flat scene. Mounting upon it, he gazed round him, in hopes of seeing something, either far away or near at hand, to take the sense of loneliness from him and break the cheerless gloom by which he was surrounded. Long and earnestly he gazed, but only saw the Hind Head Hills rising before him, broken and black, but nearer than they had been by some miles. He had evidently taken the wrong road, and stood undecided whether to walk back and follow the left-hand turning, the entrance of which he had quitted, or strike across the heath, and so get into what was undoubtedly the shorter and more direct route to Haslemere; but its rough, uneven surface made him pause before he ventured on so uncertain and unpromising an expedition.

Cursing the landlord for a fool, and his beast's lameness, over and over again, he turned to take another survey, and fix upon some guiding point to keep him in a straight line, when in the distance he saw a horse and cart coming from the direction of Godalming. Now, then, at last he

should be able to obtain the necessary information as to the road he ought to take, and perhaps get a lift in the man's cart to help him on.

Descending from the hillock, he stood waiting the coming up of the man in the cart.

The horse came swiftly down the road, trotting good ten miles an hour, the wheels spinning behind it, and the dust pounding under its hoofs. Clattering up the rising ground, the horse and cart came on to where the hillock rose by the wayside. At sight of the strange man standing under it, the driver pulled up, and approached at a slackened speed, keeping his horse well in hand, and holding his whip ready to start him into a gallop. With his eyes fixed upon the stranger, he came cautiously along, casting suspicious glances on either side, as if doubtful whether to turn back or gallop on.

The man came to a dead halt at last, and half turned his horse's head. The stranger called to him,—yet still the driver of the chaise cart kept his horse half turned, and appeared more disinclined than ever to approach.

After a slight pause, the man drove a little nearer to the hillock, then pulled up again, and halted when some dozen yards off, eyeing the stranger all the while, and half inclined

to make a dash of it, and gallop past him at all hazards.

The stranger shouted to him, and asked if he were on the right road to Haslemere?

"Haslemere!" replied the man in the cart; "no! This is the way to Liphook; you are on the Portsmouth road."

"Liphook!" shouted the pedestrian; "they told me at the 'King's Arms' it was a straight road all the way."

"So it is, if you had kept the left-hand road. You should have turned off at Milford."

"Can't I strike across the heath, and so get into it?" inquired the stranger.

"You'd find it rough work between here and the Beeches. Your best plan would be to go on to the 'Hind Head,' and so through the lanes."

"How far is the 'Hind Head' from here, and what is it?"

"An ale-house on the other side the Devil's Punch Bowl. But you know it well enough, I dare say," said the driver, with a peculiar leer at the questioner.

"Not I. I never was on the road before, and but for my horse failing should not have been here now. But as it is, there is no help for it, and I must find my way as well as I am able.



How far am I to go before I get to the ale-house you talk of?"

"Three miles," replied the driver, a little less gruffly than before. Determined, however, not to be put off his guard by appearances, he moved his horse cautiously along; not that he was actually afraid of a single footpad, but those fellows generally went in pairs, and the other might be skulking close at hand for aught he knew. At last he said, "It is bad travelling in these parts, and if you are a stranger here, as you say you are, I should advise you to push on at once, and avoid rough fellows on the road. Hind Head Heath is not an over safe place day or night, and as full of highwaymen as a rope is of onions. I only wish I had the hanging 'em, that's all." Touching his horse with his whip, the man drove on again, at even a quicker pace than he had come along the road from Godalming.

As the horse darted off, and the wheels spun by him, the traveller saw written on the side panel of the cart, "John Bushell, maltster, Liphook." Despairing of further information, he turned into the road and pursued his way.

The uncertain rays of a November sun were now obscured by low threatening clouds, drifting

on in broken masses, while the wind whistled over the wide expanse of heath; and as the bleak air came sighing by him, the wayfarer buttoned his riding coat over his chest, and quickening his pace, walked onward to where the dark and rugged moor hills stretched far away into the distance, while the gusty wind swept over the bare brown heath, blowing the dust into small eddies in the road, and sweeping it in stormy whirls before him.

The country became still wilder the nearer he approached the broken Hind Head Hills, while crumbling moorland, jagged and rough, loomed over head, and shut the desolate prospect from his sight. In hopes of obtaining a view of the way beyond, he scrambled up the stony and precipitous ascent, and saw whence he stood how a continuous chain of those bare, bleak hills bore away to the left, until the land fell off, to rise again in the stretched-out sweep of Blackdown. All was dark and bare, without a tree or shrub to break the trackless waste. Nothing but heather, whorts, and fern grew on the heathy soil, and he was glad to scramble down and pursue once more his solitary way.

Turning at a sharp curve, the road twisted to the right hand, and rounding a huge hollow, bore

away under the broken hills, which shut it in as in a cave, while stunted bushes, tangled and wild with thorns, hung drooping over the fearful gorge, fringing its dreadful steep with overhanging shrubs and briars.

And there before him, standing blackly out against the sky, a gibbet was set up, while hanging in the creaking chains a mouldering corpse swayed with a dull heavy motion in the wind; and some way further on, a wooden cross was raised, on which was inscribed how a poor traveller had been found upon that spot, cruelly murdered by unknown men.

Not a living thing was in sight, nor a sound to break the awful gloom of that dull road, circling half way round the Devil's Punch Bowl, except the distant grating of the gibbet's chain, or the sudden winging of some startled bird. The frightful hollow dived with a sudden plunge into the earth. Scooped like a cauldron out of the wild and barren ground, its depth looked awful, its wide expanse forming a monstrous circle, as if all the armies of the world had met together and dug it out as a huge pit in which to bury their dead.

Fascinated, yet awe-struck by the sight, he gazed for a few moments, then drawing back,

turned to pursue his way. Starting with a sudden spring he bounded into the road, as he saw a man sleeping, or feigning sleep, lying among the bushes growing at the edge of the gorge. He raised his whip, grasping it so as to form a weapon of the handle, and stood looking at the sleeping figure, expecting him to start upon his legs and grapple with him. The man slept on, and treading swiftly yet silently, the stranger went stealthily and fearfully onwards.

The dismal road at length was passed. Before him lay a wide extent of distant country, which broke on his delighted view in all the glorious picturesqueness of wood and valley. He stood upon the upland, gazing wistfully down the descending road sloping to the vale beyond, its steep sides covered with gorse and fern, while browsing in the midst the sheep climbed up and down, or spread themselves in woolly knots in peaceful resting.

Another mile, and before him stood the ale-house, with its swinging sign-board, cracked and started from its frame, on which was written in indistinct and time-worn letters, the "Hind Head."

## CHAPTER II.

### THE "HIND HEAD."

Tired with his walk, hungry and thirsty, the pedestrian turned towards the ale-house.

The maltster's cart stood on the outside, the horse looking as cool and comfortable as though ten miles an hour were a mere nothing to him, and a trot to Guildford and back, a matter not to be thought about, while resting in the snug chimney corner of the house, his master sat with his mug of home-brewed before him, smoking his pipe, and appearing as much at his ease as even Dobbin himself.

Making his way inside the house, the wayfarer looked about him with a feeling of warmth and comfort at the crackling fire, blazing on the old-fashioned hearth, while the three or four farm labourers lounging upon the well-worn benches of the wooden screen circling the fire, drew a little on one side to make room for the smartly-dressed new comer, and smoked their pipes in respectful silence.

The stranger gave a half nod to the maltster, took his seat, called for bread and cheese and a mug of ale.

The men smoked on, or spoke to each other in low under tones, while the stranger ate his bread and cheese with a relish, drank a long draught of the "Hind Head's" home-brewed, and called for a fresh mugful.

Refreshed and comforted with his food and drink, the traveller looked about him at the strange abode in which he was located, and the usual accompaniments of a wayside, old-fashioned house of entertainment—the wide chimney, the huge logs blazing on the hearth, and the kettle steaming over it, hanging by its iron hook and chain, while half-way up the gaping fire-place hung wondrous hams, put there to dry and smoke; and on the rack, crossing the low ceiling of the room, chines and flitches lay in a row, while nailed against the white-washed walls, or fastened to the framework of the rack, slung knots of onions and dried herbs, ready for winter use.

In the corner, opposite the maltster, a man, dressed in a velveteen jacket, corduroy knee-breeches and leather gaiters, reaching from the top of his ankle-boots half-way up his thighs, sat in a doze over the fire, his brawny figure swaying

backwards and forwards with its own listless weight, his broad shoulders and bull-like neck showing at a glance enormous power of bone and muscle. Roused from his drunken slumber by the stir occasioned by the entrance of the new comer, the man raised his face, red and flushed from constant drinking, and eyed about him with a savage, scowling expression, as if questioning the right of any one to make a noise whilst he was asleep; his crisp, short hair, tinged with the iron gray of time, curled over his massive head, which, now he raised it to its full height, towered over the rest of the sitters by some inches. The large proportions of the man were evident at a glance, and a kind of enforced silence came upon the rest of the men, in presence of the powerful bully, who had just roused himself out of his doze.

"Hold your jabber, can't ye?" shouted the man, in the strong dialect peculiar to Sussex; "can't a feller sleep a bit, but you must keep scrapin', and clatterin', and naggin', like women at a christenin'?" Then, turning to the landlord, and stretching out his empty mug, he called, "Here, old skinflint, another pint from the same barrel as before, and don't try to put any o' the new stuff on Ned Pullen, or I'll chuck it in your face—mind that."

"If you'll take my advice, you'll stay as you are ; you'll only be getting quarrelsome, and doing somebody a mischief, if you has any more. I know your ways of old, Master Ned."

"If you don't do what I tell 'ee, and that pretty quick, I'll be doin' *you* a mischief, and one as you won't get over for a month nor more," cried the half-drunken bully, rising from his seat, his head almost touching the ceiling of the room ; "Ned Pullen's a man, and not to be talked to by the likes o' you."

"Oh, you needn't bawl in that style at me," replied the landlord, as though he were no stranger to Ned, or his bullying either, and not to be put out of his way by it ; "I ain't your wife, nor I'm not going to fight you neither, so you needn't kick up a row where there's no one to mind you."

"Wife or no wife," stormed the excited ruffian, dashing his big fist upon the table, as the landlord dived into his cellar for the ale ; "she had better not talk to me. Ned Pullen's a man, and I should like to see the chap as says he ain't. Oh, here's my pint, and it's lucky for you if it's the right sort."

It evidently *was* the right sort by the way Pullen sucked it down, smacked his lips, then



sank with a satisfied grunt upon his seat again. "All right this time; you knows what I likes well enough, if you warn't such a sneak, always trying to cheat a man out of his nat'ral drink. The squire hasn't a better barrel in his cellar nor that."

"Or you'd have found it out long ago, and let his pheasants and hares alone, if only for a chance of trying its flavour," said the maltster.

"Oh, hang him, no!" roared Pullen; "there's no gettin' at *his* ale; he keeps it for his fine chaps from Lon'on; they'll drink it up, and him arter, if it comes to that; they'll never leave him while he has a guinea in his pocket or an acre to his back, and sarve him right for lettin' men, as was bred and born on the estate, die in a ditch, for aught he cares, or we care either, for the matter o' that."

"You're in the luck of it, Ned, with your wife at home to help you to a pint out of her pocket, or you'd find the ale at the "Hind Head" as hard to come at as the squire's. I only wish my wife war of the same mind, and did the work, while I drank ale," cried one of the men, while the rest of his companions laughed, and shook their heads, thinking how little chance there was of their wives following the example of Dame Pullen.

"I tell you what it is, Master Dick Downer, you'll never be satisfied till I have knocked your head off; I have done it once before, and I'll do it again, if you don't keep your tongue in your teeth," exclaimed Pullen, staggering to his feet, as if to put his threat in execution.

"No harm, man," interposed the new comer, "a pint of ale all round, landlord, and I'll pay for it."

The thought of more ale dropped Pullen into his seat, without another word, and draining his half-emptied mug, he handed it to the landlord to be refilled. Lifting his replenished and foaming measure to his lips, Pullen drank a long gulping draught, and never took the mug away until he had swallowed its contents. Sinking his head upon his chest, he swayed about for a few minutes, then went to sleep again by the side of the chimney corner.

Anxious to assure themselves of the soundness of the drunken bully's slumbers, the men sat for a few minutes silently watching the drooping head, and listening to the slow, heavy breathing of the sleeping man.

"What squire is it you talk of?" inquired the stranger, when assured of the soundness of Pullen's slumbers; "and who is it owns the land about here, this fellow has taken such a spite against?"

"Oh, it's not the squire of this place Ned grumbles at!—not that he's over particular who he grumbles at or quarrels with when the drink's in him, as it is now," said the maltster, nodding his head in the direction of the sleeping man, who was fetching his breath with a heavy snort. "Though I remember the time, when he was as fine a man as ever stept in the county, and civil spoken into the bargain; but drink and idle habits have been his ruin, as they have been the ruin of better men nor him before to-day. Good or bad, well-doing or ill-doing, all's one to drunken Ned, who'll quarrel and fight with any man, and sot his life away so long as there is ale to be got, or a shilling to be wrung out of his wife's earnings to buy it with. If it warn't that she does odd jobs for the gentry round here, who give her needlework and help her on a bit, Master Ned would have been in the poorhouse long ago."

"And a good job, too! It'd bring his stomach down a bit, mayhap, and teach him what bread and water was made of," joined in the landlord, speaking in the same undertone as the maltster; although, judging from the heavy breathing of the sleeping man, there was not much fear of his overhearing what they said.

“Does he do nothing for his living, then?” inquired the stranger.

“As little as he can, you may take my word for it—at least no regular work, since he was turned off the estate by the old squire for his drunken habits, ill-using his wife, and driving his son away to sea. The only thing he does, just to keep his hand in, I suppose, is a little night work now and then.”

“Night work! how do you mean?”

“Poaching,” replied the maltster, stooping forward, as though it were necessary to communicate the fact in a loud whisper. “He is a known hand at that, and a desperate fellow to meet with, I can tell you; for he is as strong as the side of a house, and the most noted bruiser miles and miles about. Why, bless you, he’s as well known in Sussex as the Lord Mayor in London, and has been up a dozen times before the Bench for breaches of the peace; but, somehow or other, always managed to get off. He and his family before him, have lived on the estate for more than a couple of centuries, so the old squire didn’t want to press too hard, I suppose. But he’s gone, worse luck, and the young squire, who has come into the estate, vows vengeance against him, and swears he’ll pay him out the first time he catches

him with a gun or net on his land. But, bless you, Ned doesn't care a snap of his fingers for him or his threats either; the moment his back's turned, he and his pals are at their old tricks, set the keepers at defiance, and walk over the place as if it were their own."

"Well, my friend," said the stranger, when the maltster paused to knock the ashes out of his pipe, wishing to change the conversation to what he had uppermost in his mind, "you did not give me much information as to the road—a worse one I was never on, and one I should not like to try after dark."

"It would be a dangerous game," replied the maltster, refilling and lighting his pipe, "unless you were well armed, and had a mind to try a random shot or two, and stand the chance of getting an ounce of lead in your head for your pains. That Devil's Punch Bowl is an ugly spot, and no end of murders and robberies have taken place there. Why, it was only the week before last, a sailor, who had been paid off at Portsmouth, was tramping it to London, when he was knocked on the head by a couple of fellows, who pounced upon him, and, after emptying his pockets, pitched him neck and crop down the gulf, where he lay stunned, and, by a mercy,

wasn't killed, for a fall down there is enough to knock the life out of any man."

"Were the fellows taken?"

"Not they, nor likely to be. Why the landlord here could tell you a hundred stories of Hind Head Heath, and more robberies and murders on it than he could count. It is known as the most dangerous spot to travel on all England over, and I would not advise any man to try it, unless in company, or with his pistols ready cocked, for a man is set upon and stopped by a couple of mounted flashmen before he knows where he is, who knock him off his horse, rob or murder him, then scamper over the Heath, where old Nick himself could not catch them, though he's pretty sure to run them down at last, and provide safe quarters for them, too. But my nag's waiting—good morning."

The maltster rose from the chimney corner, while the traveller, anxious to pursue his way, paid his score, and inquired of the ale-house keeper if he could direct him to Chase House.

"Chase House?" echoed the landlord, "If Ned Pullen were sober, he'd show you fast enough; he was born and bred on the squire's land, and could take you there blindfolded."

"Oh, it's Master Blakeborough's place you

want, is it?" inquired the maltster, eyeing the stranger from head to foot.

"Yes, Martin Blakeborough's."

"Ay, ay, we know him well enough. But how came you by this road?—you should have struck off at Milford."

"I told you when I met you on the Heath I had mistaken my way, but you did not seem too well disposed to set me right."

"Ay, I remember," replied the maltster, "but I don't much like speaking to strangers on the Heath when I come from market. You have come a plaguy long way round for all that; it is good fifteen miles by Hind Head, and the direct road through Haslemere would have taken you there in twelve."

"How far shall I have to walk before I get there?"

"Six miles if a yard, and rough walking, too."

"Which way must I take?"

"I'll show you." The maltster moved to the open doorway of the house, and pointing to a broken and rough lane at right angles with the ale-house, said—"That is the nearest road, but bad walking for about a mile and a half, and so on through Haslemere; when you get there, any one will tell you the way, for Chase House is the oldest

place in the county, and the Blakeboroughs one of the oldest families, and in ancient times were men of mark, I can tell you ; but their race is run, I am afraid ; more's the pity."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, sir, I don't want to speak ill words of an old family, if I can help it ; but if Martin Blakeborough don't wind it up, my name's not John Bushell, that's all."

"The young squire is not very popular among his neighbours, it appears."

The maltster stared at the traveller, as he replied, "Popular ! of all the wild, reckless fellows ever put foot in stirrup, I take him to be the worst ! The gentry turn their backs on him, and there's not a gentleman's house ten miles round could give him shelter, without bringing scandal upon their wives or daughters. Popular ! ask the poor farm tenants, whose young crops he and his companions ride over, with as little care as they would over a piece of stubble, injure their fences, and worry their cattle. There's one comfort, it can't last long, for what with horse-racing, wenching, cards and dice, the estate will soon slip through his fingers."

"You give him a good character," replied the stranger.



"Not worse than he deserves," said the landlord, who had joined them on the outside the house, and now stood by them, listening to their conversation, "although perhaps I ought not to say so. A man like me can't afford to find fault with his betters, whatever he may think; but Master Bushell's character of the young squire is a true one, only not half bad enough."

"It can't be up to the mark, however black he's painted," resumed John Bushell, with whom the squire was evidently no favourite; "a man without regard to kith or kin, or the name his father left him, famous in the county and as old as the first William's. He's a likely one to make it last, isn't he, or hand it down to *his* son? Not he!—he'll sell and mortgage, strip the estate, and leave it as bare as a hop-pole before he has done with it, or played his precious pranks out. He has no more regard to the honour and honesty of his race, than I have to a sack of malt, which is worth just so much money as it will fetch, the best bidder buys both. And his son—if ever he live to have one—will cry shame upon him, for parting with his birthright to pay losses at cards and dice. Broad acres and ancient oaks, staked against bits of painted card-board, or loaded bones. We all know about here, the Manor

Farm has just been sold to raise the wind, and if what we hear of his last run at Newmarket is true, it won't be long before another slice of the old land goes after it."

"He may sober down, perhaps," pleaded the stranger, in extenuation, "when he has sown his wild oats."

"Wild oats, indeed!" cried the bluff maltster, echoing the word, and scowling upon the new comer. "Wild oats! a man made up of mischief like that!" There's not an ill-going fellow in the whole county he doesn't make up to as a companion, out of spite, now his betters have shut their doors against him, till he, and his, have become a terror to the neighbourhood. Why, there's drunken Ned Pullen there, whom he would hang if he caught him in one of his preserves, isn't half so great a poacher as himself. He'll snare any one's game, drag any man's pond, if he has only a grudge against him; and as for wenches, not a girl's safe from him."

"There's Dick Coombs's, for one," said the landlord, shaking his head. "Poor Dick!"

"Ah! poor Dick, indeed! But what does he care, whose heart he breaks, or whose child he ruins? He is a fine gentleman, and can do what he likes, because he can jingle more guineas in

his pocket than a poor fellow like Dick, and ruin him out and out, if he has a spite against him. There isn't even an old servant left in the place! Man, woman, and child, all turned off, to make room for a set of vagabonds, who will pick his bones after the prime feasters have made a meal of him! He is a disgrace to the county, and I wish it was well rid of him."

"Can you tell if he has any company at his place?" inquired the traveller.

"Leave him alone for that," rejoined the maltster; "a set of horse-racing, card-cheating sharpers, who will pigeon him of every guinea, and laugh at him when their game is played. It was only last week he returned from a month's rioting in London, and a pretty crew he brought down with him, I'm told."

"That's right enough," chimed in the landlord, "and when Pullen came in for his pint this morning, he said the squire and his friends were out with the hounds."

"Then there's a chance of some of them breaking their necks. It's rough riding over those hills, and I hope the fox will lead them through the thick of it."

The stranger appeared ill at ease, during the brief dialogue between the maltster and the host

of the "Hind Head." Bending first on one, then the other, a half suspicious glance, he stood eyeing them with a kind of mute inquiry in his look, as though anxious to be satisfied whether or not their conversation was directed to him, or if he were in any way referred to, in their discourse. At length he asked, in a tone of as much indifference as he could assume, "How long the old squire they talked of had been dead?"

"Long enough to be missed, that I can tell you. How long *has* the squire been dead, Joe?" inquired the maltster.

"Two years, or close upon it. He took the old lady's loss sadly, and went about the country shunning everybody, and looking dismal and pale as a ghost. He had enough, poor soul, to break his heart, which was none of the softest, I have heard say; but Master Martin tried what it was made of, by his doings at college, and by the heavy debts he contracted. The old gentleman paid them once——"

"And once too often," interrupted the maltster. "What good did it do, to empty his pockets for a fellow like that? Wasn't he expelled afterwards, and didn't his father at last disown him? and didn't he break his mother's heart? He did, everybody round here knows that, when he

brought disgrace on friends and kindred by his London doings, and all through that notorious blackleg and sharper, Nic Upton, as they called him."

The traveller's face flushed up, then turned deadly pale, as he fixed his eyes upon the maltster, but said nothing.

"That fellow," resumed John Bushell, "was his ruin, from first to last. His college chum, who led him into all sorts of vices, and then, like an evil genius as he was, taught him the tricks of a gambler, until he became almost as great a cheat and rascal as himself."

The traveller still looked at the maltster, but made no reply.

"But there came an end of him," Bushell went on, with a half-expressed triumph in his tone and manner; "he was found out in some swindling job or other, and as London air did not quite agree with him, he took to his heels and travelled for the benefit of his health, which I hope will be a long time coming about. So for the last two years nothing has been heard of the notorious Captain Nicholas Upton.

"And your friend Blakeborough," cried the other, with a malicious smile, "had he anything to do in that affair?"

“Why, some thought so, but as nothing was proved against him, the least said, it was thought, the better. Give a dog a bad name—you know the rest, I dare say.” The maltster got into his cart, and with a nod to the landlord, and a “Good morning!” to the stranger, drove off towards Liphook.

Without waiting for further observation, the traveller struck across the road, and so into the lanes leading towards Haslemere.

The ale-house keeper watched him from the doorway, and as the stranger paced along he saw how he kept cutting with his riding-whip in savage energy, at everything within his reach.

The landlord returned into his house, and Captain Nicholas Upton was soon out of sight.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE QUELL.

AMID wild picturesque scenery, lying about, and forming as it were the centre of a triangle, the the counties of Hants, Surrey, and Sussex meet at a point, and then branch off, spreading far away over their several shires: immediately contiguous to this junction, and stretching towards the south, is a bleak range of hills called Black-down. This swelling upland of slate-coloured, sandy heath, stands prominently forth; the stretched-out hill, lying high and dark against the way beyond, while from its top the southern coast is visible, the gleaming ocean, and the sailing ships. Overgrown with whort, gorse, and heather, the bare black hill, and the surrounding country of sterile down, or broken slope, remind the sportsman of the wilds of Scotland, to which its general aspect might be compared, or to the swelling heights of Cumberland.

From the summit of this bleak range, the prospect stretches far away over a valley towards

Petworth, while due south lies Chichester; the wide expanse, rich and varied in its landscape, studded with wooded dells, copses, and underwoods, is relieved here and there by the green slope of fertile valleys. The sharp edge of the hill, crowned and clumped with fir-trees, cuts sharply down midst broken rock and crumbling earth, tangled and overgrown with hawthorn, sloe, and holly bushes, spreading up the steep ascent, or hanging from its side in strange, fantastic growths; while sweeping from its base, and stretching miles away, crossed and intersected by high old-fashioned hedge-rows, the grass land spreads its level way. Even in this bleak November month, the earth looked fresh and green, the foliage of the trees still hung upon their boughs in scattered knots, unwilling to fall before the winter's frost set in, and sent them whirling to the ground.

On either side the shadowing range of hill, lie thick and frowning woods of oak, and birch, and ash, while further on, towards Bexley Heath and Midhurst, the woodlands skirt along a sloping vale, rich in its pasture and varied in its beauty; the dark umbrageous woods shading the emerald land with dense dark patches, clustered and massed upon the rising ground, while threading



along the distant valley runs a narrow stream, fed in its course by drainage from the far outlying lands, its winding channel twisting through the marshy soil, until at last it flows into the Wey near Godalming.

Along a devious pathway, crossing the rugged moor, and to the left of the long range of hills, a man came pacing slowly on his way, upon the sandy track worn on the heath by frequent passage. He walked with a dejected heavy tread, his eyes bent on the ground, plodding on towards a wooded dell, thrusting its deep though narrow gorge, far up a forked gap lying between the rugged Downs. His gun was across his shoulder, and over it were slung a couple of rabbits, while hanging by a short chain, a dead stoat lay fixed within the iron teeth of a small trap he carried in his hand. At times he stopped to look over the wide expanse of heath and the low sloping land beyond, as if in search of something. Nothing was to be seen but the far-off cattle and the distant spire of the church at Lurgashall.

He drooped his head and walked along until he came to a descending path, leading from the top of Blackdown through a dense growth of underwood, where the pathway dived amidst the broken ground, and brought him by a perilous

track to the extreme edge of a ravine called the Fox Holes. Long and gloomily he looked below to where a swollen and angry torrent tore along, foaming with a dull roar over broken rocks and fallen trees, each fresh impediment urging it onward at a wilder speed, breaking in thousand eddies, as the whirling torrent found a steep down passage through a hidden channel in the ground, and dashed in cloudy spray against the sunken rocks over which it tossed and tumbled down.

The dell was thickly wooded up the almost precipitous sides of the wild gorge, down which the man came climbing, clinging to the bending saplings, or stepping from tree to tree, or rock to rock. Every now and then he would stop to look below, as if the roar of the pent and struggling water soothed him with its strange wildness, while he stood wrapped and motionless. As he turned to go upon his way again, a hawk almost started from his foot, and soaring upwards in its flight left its torn and half-devoured prey upon the ground.

The man watched the hovering bird, then, in a tone of bitter feeling, spoke as to himself, and said, "It's the likes o' you as preys upon the poor, and tears the heart out of a man, leastways I know them as does, and nought do they care who suffers,

nor who they gorge upon, so long as they have what they fancy ; ill got or well got, all's one to them. And where's the help for it, and what's a man to do, when he sees just as wild a bird striking and tearing the heart out of his child ? If I could only bring *him* down as I could that hawk !” His gun fell almost instinctively into the hollow of his arm, while his finger rested upon the trigger : “ No ! he's out o' distance, so's my game ; he's too high for a poor man like me. He'd better keep out of my way for all that though, or a stray shot may strike him unaware if I find him buzzing too near my girl.”

Without further pausing in his walk Dick Coombs shouldered his gun again, and pursued his way.

He was a thickset, powerful looking man, with a rough weather-beaten face, and small blue eyes, his hair iron gray, with flakes of white patching it here and there, and as he walked his strong right hand beat upon his breast, as though he would have subdued and kept down the rising passion that swelled and heaved within. His heavy brows, shaggy and dark, were drawn with a threatening scowl over his bright piercing eye, while his clenched teeth, set together with a nervous strength, started the muscles of his jaw

until they stood out like whipcord from his cleanly shaved, but tanned and freckled cheeks.

Through copse and underwood Dick Coombs came labouring on until he reached a sunken lane, leading from the neighbourhood of Blackdown to the village of Lurgashall, and so through deep and rugged dells towards Petworth. Striking off at a sharp angle, he followed back the windings of the lane, and at a brisker pace walked towards the Quell.

On the right of this narrow lane, winding its devious way between green and high-browed banks, dark even in summer, from the tangled boughs that met and shadowed overhead, lay an open space of land, and underneath a sloping and precipitous hill of yellow clay, and sand, stood a small cottage, with its garden of about half an acre. A wooden fence crusted with moss railed round the well-stocked ground, where winter greens were thickly set between fruit trees and bushes, to make the most of the land, while all about the place was evidenced a careful industry in the well-trimmed garden and the cleanly weeded soil.

A bank of earth, at some remote period, had slipped from the hill beyond, and formed a sort of natural platform: half-way up this

bank, upon a smooth flat space, the cottage rested high and dry, backed by the frowning Black-down Hill, the garden sloping gradually from it until it reached the bottom of the decline, where the rutty lane emerged on to a sudden break of open ground, then bore away again under the range of the wild downs, their dark gloomy edge looming in a continuous line on either side the Quell, where the gamekeeper's cottage stood.

Toiling along this rugged lane, broken and seamed with cart ruts, came Captain Nicholas Upton. He paused when opposite the cottage, and for a few minutes remained looking at the heavy timbers, crossing it like old decaying ribs, the tall stack of chimney rising square and solid above the heavy thatch, discoloured with dark brown weather stains, or overgrown with green and mossy incrustations. Striking the paling sharply with the handle of his whip, he hallooed to those within.

A girl stepped hastily from the opened door, but no sooner had she cast her eyes upon the stranger than a disappointed, blank expression stole over her face as she drew back timidly, and stood looking at him in mute surprise.

Upton saw the change in her countenance, and

called out to her, "Hallo! you bright-eyed gipsy, what makes you look so glum all of a sudden? You expected your sweetheart, I suppose, and I have come instead, that's all; so make up your mind to the change with a good grace, and open the gate at once."

The girl looked at him with her full dark eyes, but said nothing in reply.

"Was it Dick the ploughman or Jim the hedger? Why, a pair of eyes like yours would turn the heads of half the beaux in London; yet here they are wetting their long lashes for some lout of a fellow, who knows as much about beauty as I do of cutting turf."

The girl still looked at him, but this time with a half smile, as much as to say, "Jim the hedger, or Dick the ploughman, wasn't the person she expected."

"Open the gate" (it was fastened by a padlock and chain), "and let me see what the red and white of your cheeks are made of, and whether they rub off as easily as they do from our town-bred beauties."

"What do you want?" was all the girl said in reply to a flattery which, perhaps, she did not understand.

"That remains to be seen, and depends on

whether you prove a Hebe or Jezebel. You won't open the gate? Well, I have jumped a higher one before to-day, and can again," replied Upton, placing his hand upon the rail, with the intention of leaping over it.

Frightened by this movement, the girl looked towards the lane, as though she half expected somebody to come along it. Turning on him her flushed and angry face, flushed and pale by turns, she said more hurriedly than before, "What do you want?"

"I'll answer you when I get a little closer. Why, you are as timid as a fawn, and more graceful, to my thinking, for all the poetmongers are so fond of it. We might excuse their "stars" if they had ever lit upon a pair of eyes like yours for the time-honoured simile. If they scorch at this distance, what will they do when close at hand? A peep can do no harm, and so——" He said no more; but, placing his hand upon the gate, cleared it at a bound.

Startled by his sudden action, the girl uttered a sharp cry. At this moment Dick Coombs came with a heavy tramp along the lane, and emerging from the hollow way, stood in sight of his cottage. Dick heard the shriek; he saw a strange man inside his garden gate (of which he always kept

the key), and his daughter standing with a frightened expression near him. With a sudden shout he bounded forward, dashed the gate open with the butt end of his gun, raised it with a threatening gesture, and cried—

“What do you want here?—what in the devil’s name do the likes o’ you come trespassing on my ground for? Can’t poor men live in peace, but fine chaps like you must come poking their noses into other men’s burrows? Out o’ this, or it’ll be the worse for you; I ha’ had too much o’ your sort already.” Smarting with the recollection of something flashing through his mind, Dick clubbed his weapon, and looked as if he would have felled Upton to his feet.

“My good clodhopping fellow, drop your gun, and stand to what you have to say like a man, and not a wild Indian, who would brain his father for a pint of rum. No harm’s done.”

“You meant it, though,” cried Dick, “and your betters have done it before you, else folks lie. But mind what you do, for, as I have blood in my veins, I’ll be revenged, if you or any of your swaggering lot play tricks with my girl. So, out with you, and at once, before I do you a mischief.” Flinging the broken gate back on its



hinges, Dick stood with a threatening gesture, pointing through it.

“Every man is king of his own castle, so out I go. I am now on the outside, on the king’s highway, and Jack’s as good as his master; and if it wasn’t that I am tired with a long walk, and not over inclined to rough work, I’d dust your jacket for you, old leather gaiters, for being insolent to a gentleman, and a friend of the squire.”

In spite of his tone of bravado, the captain’s pale face had grown paler and more sallow, for all the attempted dash he threw into his words and manner.

“The squire!” repeated Dick, with a deep utterance, while he dropped the butt end of his gun upon the ground, and stood fronting Upton with a threatening, almost savage look.

As the captain pronounced the squire’s name, the girl’s face kindled with a crimson blush, then turned pale as ashes. Fixing her eyes with a suspicious look on Upton, she withdrew towards the doorway of the cottage.

“I thought it war one o’ his flashy chaps,” cried Dick, setting his teeth, while a slight foam wetted the corners of his mouth. “Isn’t it enough for him to bring shame on a man, but he must set one of his dogs on the same scent? He’ll

never leave it till he has an ounce of lead in his brains. But let him keep out of my way, and my girl's too, or it will be the worse for him; for, poor man as I am, and bred and born in this cot, and my father before me, I'd burn it to the ground, and tramp it, with Nell on my arm, from poor-house to poor-house, afore it shall be a warren for such foxes as him to earth in. I'd tear it down with my own hands, or ever it should be a hutch to keep his pet rabbit in; and so you may tell him from me."

"What, Master Martin has been poaching, has he? Oh! I see how it is; and what did you expect with such a pretty bird as that to tempt him?"

"I expect?" said Coombs, with deep and solemn energy, his excited feelings supplying him unconsciously with strong and powerful words, "I expect to see the squire do as his father did before him, respect the rights of his tenants, and not bring shame on the homes of his people. I expect him to be as good a man—but he can't if he tried, so it's no use looking for it—as those who owned the land these hundreds of years before him, and brought credit on their names by fair dealing as men, and magistrates of the county." Breaking off again from his earnest

manner, he continued, hurriedly and fiercely, "How would you like it, if your master—if you had one—that you had been taught to look up to, man and boy, tried to bring your child to ruin? Would you stand by, and see your girl preyed on by a wild wolf?" Panting with the image his rude fancy conjured up, Coombs's eyes flashed as with living fire, and for a few minutes he remained absorbed and speechless, before the calm, collected gaze of Upton. After a pause, he added, in a milder tone, "I am his servant, and my family before me, have been servants on this estate more years than I can count; but I am tired of the work, and ha' made up my mind to ha' done with it."

The distant winding of a huntsman's horn made them turn in the direction of the sound, as a shouting "halloo!" and yelping of hounds came closer on the ear. Along the distant edge of the downs the hunt came on, hounds and horsemen all in full cry upon the fox, the red coats of the hunters starting out in bright relief along the edge of the distant moor, or glimpsing through the intervening trees. On and on they came, hunted fox and hounds, with whipper-in and huntsman close upon the pack, all tearing on along the very edge of the steep upland. It looked

like a wild hunting in the air, as, flitting round the curve formed by the Quell, they passed along with wilder cries and louder halloos. The fox, hard pressed, ran down the hill under which Dick's cottage stood, and, almost spent, staggered down the deep descent.

The fox made for the garden, followed by a swift pursuing hound, and in a corner was run down, the pack tearing and worrying at him, until the whipper-in, dismounting from his horse, slashed the hounds away, lifted the brute at arm's length, and made the hills echo as he whooped and tally-hoed the death of the fox. Then taking off the brush, pate, and pads, he threw the carcass to be fought and struggled over, by the expectant hounds, who kept leaping and yelling round him, fighting and howling for their share of the day's spoils.

A thick-set, deep-chested man, mounted on a powerful horse, was the first in at the death. Waving the brush with a screaming hallo, he shouted to his brother huntsmen as they came dashing and scrambling down the side of the hill, each one joining in the whooping chorus when they saw the brushy trophy of the fox held up by their companion, who greeted Martin Blakeborough with a boisterous laugh, as he and

his friends rode their horses pell-mell into the plot of garden ground, scattering and trampling the winter store of poor Dick Coombs.

“Didn’t I tell you I’d be first in?” cried the thick-set man, with an air of swaggering triumph. “And in I am, before you cleared the brow of the hill; so out with your guineas, Blakeborough, and think twice before you try a run against Jack another time.” Here he slapped his horse’s neck. “He’s beaten the whole lot of you, without touch of whip or spur; and I’ll lay hundreds to fifties all round, if you like, he does the same to-morrow.”

“All right, Baxter,” replied Blakeborough, alighting from his horse, “the guineas are fairly won, and you shall have the hundred as soon as I can lay my hands upon them. Just now it is low-water mark in my exchequer; but I’ll pay you, never fear.”

“Of course you will, and swinging interest too,” cried one of the sportsmen, a flashily overdressed man. “If Jack’s not paid upon the nail, he always expects something handsome to make up for lost time.”

“I’ll pay him, principal and interest too,” rejoined Blakeborough.

“Oh! it isn’t the terms I object to; only don’t

make so long a run of it as this vermin did, and nearly stole away after all. If he had turned into the lane, his brush would have been safe enough, he'd have run to earth in a twinkling."

At the first sight of the huntsmen, Dick Coombs had sent his daughter inside the cottage. He now stood leaning on his gun, with a face of blank despair, looking at his garden, trampled and torn, his winter stock broken, crushed, and scattered about.

"It is well enough for the likes o' you, gentlemen, to have your sport, but who's to pay my loss? You have knocked my ground into a slush between you, and who's to pay Dick Coombs?—who's to pay, I say?"

"Send in your bill to the Lord Chancellor or the Commons in Parliament; they'll soon pay you for your cabbages," laughed the squire, while his companions laughed and shouted, too, in evident approval of the way in which it was suggested Dick Coombs was to be paid.

But Dick was not to be put off so. His tone grew sterner, as he cried, "Times was when the squire of this place wouldn't hurt a poor man, without making up for it someways; the time was when a Blakeborough wouldn't have run through a tenant's ground without paying for his

sport. Them times is gone, and the sooner we poor men are off the land the better."

"Soon as you like, and be hanged to you!" stormed Blakeborough, stung by the words, and turning with a threatening brow upon his game-keeper.

"You'll leave Nelly behind you, won't you?" laughed one of the sportsmen. "The squire can't do without her—can you, Martin?"

With quivering lips and ashy cheeks, Coombs faced about upon the speaker with so fierce an expression that he slunk away without venturing a reply. "I'd like to see the man, be he squire or devil, as dares say that again," roared Coombs, "his blood or mine shall pay for it."

"Back with you, old dog that you are!" cried Blakeborough, thrusting his tall figure in the way of the incensed Coombs, "or I'll have you turned off the estate, to die in a ditch! None of your big looks at me, or I'll set the hounds on you; by the sky above us, I will! Shut up your foul mouth, and keep your tongue within your teeth, or I'll soon let you see who is master here. Go where you like, and when you like. If it comes to that, you should have packed off long ago, only Nelly has been your protection."

"Has she so?" Coombs, white with rage

before, now turned red with shame. "And is it you tell it me?—you, Master Martin, that I have dandled on my knee, when your father—God bless and be with him—first came to the estate; and now his son doesn't blink at bringing shame and ruin on his old servants! Heaven bless us in our need, and keep our hands from murder!" Half-muttering the last words, Dick Coombs appeared to grow into an old man; he drooped his head upon his chest, and remained passive and silent.

"So now you know what you have to expect. For the future, learn to be civil to gentlemen, who are my friends."

Dick Coombs did not even look at him, but walking slowly to the doorway of his cottage, he laid his gun across his knees, and sat upon the step, guarding the entrance to his home with jealous care.

Upton had moved a little on one side as the hunt came down the hill, and during the confusion and noise that followed, remained leaning against the broken gate, to all appearance an uninterested spectator of what was going on, amusing himself by striking with his riding-whip the tops from withered stalks, or the dead flowers still hanging on their faded stems. He neither stirred



nor spoke, but stood watching Blakeborough and his friends, scanning them with his cold, calculating eye, and listening attentively to their conversation.

Dick Coombs sat on his cottage-step, his hand resting on his gun, as a mute warning no one was to pass that way. Blakeborough looked at him, then raised his eyes towards the lattice overhead, in evident expectation of seeing some one there to answer his inquiring gaze; but Nelly was watching unobserved from behind the door, looking at Blakeborough, as he watched and looked in vain.

Turning, with a disappointed frown, he remained for a few moments undecided what to do. With her father resting in dogged silence before his open door, there was no chance of speaking to her while he remained in his present humour. Twisting on his heel, Blakeborough was on the point of joining his companions, when he became aware of the presence of the strange man leaning against the gate, switching his stick, and looking at him with a suppressed smile, as though he were enjoying the disappointment and annoyance under which he smarted.

No sooner did their eyes meet, than a deadly pallor stole over Blakeborough's handsome yet

dissipated countenance, as he fixed his eyes on Upton, with a startled, almost terrified expression ; while lounging through the gate, the captain walked into the garden ground, and stood face to face with Martin Blakeborough.

“Upton !” almost gasped the squire, in a suppressed tone, as if doubting the evidence of his own senses.

“Yes, Nic Upton, and not a ghost, though you stare at me as if I had just thrown off my winding-sheet.”

“What in the devil’s name brings you here ?” cried the other, no longer questioning but that the strange man who stood before him was indeed Captain Nicholas Upton.

“What do I want here ? Why, you, to be sure ; and I am glad to find you in such good feather ; so don’t keep staring there as if you saw a Bow Street Runner, but shake hands as an old friend should.”

Blakeborough did as he was told, almost mechanically, completely unnerved, and slightly trembling before the unexpected presence of his quondam friend ; while Upton, to cut short the awkward pause, and the stir his appearance had occasioned among the huntsmen—who began talking together in low whispers, pointing first at

him, then at Blakeborough—said, “I am tired; I have walked till my legs ache; so, if you have a spare horse, perhaps you will give me a mount.”

“A mount!—where to?”

“To your place, of course. Where else do you expect an old friend to go? There is little Nelly, to be sure,” resumed Upton, looking first at Martin, then at Coombs, “but her father is in the way, and seems more inclined to knock a man down than make him welcome, as an honest yeoman should, especially with such a beauty in his keeping, and a fine young squire to look after her.” He spoke this in a bantering, half-satirical tone; then, seeing how the sportsmen kept whispering and pointing to him, he continued, in a sharp, authoritative voice, “Come, have done with this. Get me a horse, and don’t be all day thinking about it.”

Blakeborough pointed, almost mechanically, to his own. The captain threw himself into the saddle, without a word, while, turning to his companions, the squire waved his hand for them to go on, then led the way on foot through the broken gate, followed by Upton, mounted on his horse.

The thick-set man, whom the squire had addressed as Baxter, and who had won the hundred guineas of him, here turned his head over

his shoulder, and exchanged a look of recognition with the captain, though neither of them spoke, or took any further notice, beyond that momentary glance, which was just sufficient to show they knew and understood each other, but nothing further. Baxter gave a shout; then, putting his horse at the fence, dashed him over it, and galloped down the lane, followed by the boon companions of the squire, in a direction opposite to that by which Upton had reached the Quell, and leading towards Chase House.

The gamekeeper still sat upon the door-step; but no sooner had Upton and the squire walked side by side into the lane, than he started up, and levelling his gun with a deadly aim at Blakeborough, stood for an instant glancing along the barrel. Upton turned in his saddle, as if to take another look at Nelly, when the gamekeeper, surprised in his murderous intent, dropped the muzzle of his gun, and continued motionless, watching them further down the windings of the lane—Blakeborough pacing dejectedly by the side of the horse, and the captain turning in his saddle every now and then, looking back at Coombs.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE CURATE.

THE old church at Lurgashall was lit with an unusual brightness. The slant rays from the setting sun streamed between clumps of yew-trees, shadowing on either side the porch, lighting the churchyard, and glancing from the tops of rustic grave-stones far up the antique spire of the village church. And there, within its shade, growing every moment more obscured and dark, as the sinking orb grew less and less, then with a fading gleam expired, old monuments and tombs showed dimly in their still repose, and left the tablets indistinct upon the walls. The metred merits of departed saints, of godly men and women, writ on the pavement of the echoing aisle, passed into the gloom, as impossible to trace as might have been the fabled virtues and graces of those whose ashes lay beneath ; and yet reposing in the chancel of that old church were buried men of ancient birth, of rank and honourable lineage ; a goodly list of knights or famous churchmen, cut in stone or brass.

Here the first Blakeborough was buried, and on his decaying tomb children had been taught to read his deeds of daring, and how for good service done to his kingly master, he had been rewarded with wealth and land—the land which he had won with his strong right arm in many a bloody field, when knights rode thundering to the charge, raising their battle-cry, clashing in their suits of steel, or breaking through the foe with axe and spear. The land remained, while he who owned it first, lay mouldering underneath the dim old church, his stony lineaments sculptured like a giant's effigy, large, and square, and massive—his hands raised in the attitude of prayer; while resting by his side reclined his iron mace, and large two-handed sword. A noble list they were who followed—their tombs placed in a row beside the grim old warrior, the founder and the head of his house; while underneath a newly-erected monument, that all the villagers had flocked to see, reposed the last-departed of his race, Martin Blakeborough, and his loving wife Anne.

Outside the church, and closing round about its time-worn walls, the churchyard spread its open space, solemn, and dark, and dull, where heaped-up graves of ancient dwellers in the parish, of time-worn men and hopeful children,

rose in small mounds above the tall, rank grass, their ashes mingling in the cold, damp earth, at humble distance from the select 'abiding-place of knightly bones, as if even in their graves no touch of fellowship should come to them; but each within his narrow house left to rot and crumble, until the last trump should sound, and send their startled spirits to be judged by Him who had created them; while spreading round it, the mist hung like a veil, until at last it wrapped both church and church-yard in a dim opaque.

On the other side the burial-ground, shut in by thick and bushy evergreens, stood the rectory, an old-fashioned pile of building, surrounded by its garden-walks and pleasure-grounds—the gravel paths winding and twisting here and there, as though the owner wished to cheat himself into the belief that its single acre might, by good management, be made to look like two. The trim flower-beds, the thick-set shrubs, all kept in nicest order—not a twig but had its proper place—and the smooth paths as free from blemish as a well-swept room.

Leaning on his spade, the old sexton eyed about him with a look of mute approval, trying to inspect the fruits of his own handiwork, and content himself with the belief there wasn't a garden

kept like that "nowheres in all the county." But gravel-paths and flower-beds were now melted into one; and the level lawns, smooth as the pile of velvet, might be covered with a drift of leaves for anything he could make out to the contrary. So, leaving the garden to take care of itself, and grow more dark and misty still, the old sexton gathered up his tools, and hobbled off towards the kitchen to eat his supper, proud only of two things—grave-making, and the rectory garden.

An old and faithful servant of the Church, Mr. Marchmont had lived to see strange things, to see young boys grow into old men, and old men fade away and leave him there behind, to preach the same old sermons, and do his office in the same old parish church, without once pausing in his duties or doing them at second-hand. He had no care beyond; no love, but what grew out of that parish church; no wife, no child to make him selfish, or take away from the large love the old man entertained for all his flock. There was not one of them but he had known for fifty years—setting aside those people who had been born at a later date—and regularly as Sunday came, he had preached to them the same well-thumbed sermon, in its due and proper order, and so



throughout the pile he still kept on till it was ended, and, the new year began, commenced the pile again.

There was not a man or woman in the place but loved the rector—loved him and honoured him for the simple life he led, and for the words of wisdom he would speak to them in their time of trouble and distress ; but he was sparing of his words, and never spoke more than was necessary, except to children. These he would talk to with something like a childish prattle, and take delight in telling them old nursery tales, or sing-song rhymes, while they would gather round him in a group, listening to his pleasant stories, or run out after him when he passed their cottage-doors, to be patted on the head, or be made happy by the gift of halfpence. But there his bounty ended, for he was as saving of his money as he was sparing of his words. Even the pence given to children came slowly from his pocket ; and, except upon some pressing occasions, or where he could not well hold back, he was never known to part with gold or silver. He had a fancy for new guineas ; he would sit and look at them, and count them one by one, keep them in his pockets for a week or more, and never part with them until their bright faces grew dis-

coloured, or he could get others to supply their place.

The sexton and the parish clerk, who were old bachelors like himself, were regularly installed at the rectory, to pother about him and do odd jobs, which they could do better than younger men to suit his fancy ; and while the sexton, when unemployed on his other and more important duties, worked in his garden, the parish clerk dwindled into a kind of general factotum—a necessary appendage to the old man's comfort, who, when his duties at the church were ended, read the news to him, told him what was going on in the village, and played backgammon with him of an evening, until the rector nodded in his chair, and his factotum helped him into bed.

A worthy pastor of a wide-spread flock, the rector had done his ministering soberly and well. But now old Time had come upon him, and his congregation could hardly hear one word in ten of his once wise and moral lessoning. All this at last became so painful, that the more influential of his parishioners had, after some trouble, prevailed on Mr. Marchmont to appoint a curate to do duty for him. This was a sore point with the old gentleman, and it was only by beating about the question they had in view, they could at all

induce him to listen to the proposal, or convince him he was not quite so young as he had been fifty years ago, or so able to discharge the duty incumbent on his position.

Pressed on all sides, he had at last been coaxed and humoured into appointing, although sorely against his inclination, a curate to relieve him of the greater portion of his labours, and as Mr. Stapleton had been strongly recommended to him as a young man on whose ability, conduct, and rectitude he could quite depend, the rector was left at liberty to preach when his health permitted, or upon some important occasion, when his presence in the pulpit would be sure to be attended with the necessary consideration due to him as a revered and well-beloved pastor.

The new curate performed his duties greatly to the satisfaction of an admiring congregation, and during the six months he had officiated, the parish church had been filled with an attentive auditory, listening with pleased attention to his well-selected texts and admirable sermons, addressed to the understanding as well as the good feeling of those by whom he was surrounded ; so that even Mr. Marchmont began at last to regard him with a favourable eye ; and he would look at him with a puzzled expression in his face, shaking

his head, and wondering where it was he had seen that pale yet thoughtful countenance before. It came upon him like a dreamy vision of some face he had seen, yet how or when he could not even guess. But the curate was a modest, well conducted young man, full of deference to the rector's superior wisdom—always willing to be instructed in his duties, or to amend his sermons, by some hints from the fifty odd volumes, heaped in a mass for his especial edification, to make selections from, and improve, as the rector said, "his style and matter," by some of the rather over-ripe fruits of his own early study.

By humouring the old rector, without doing injustice to himself, or forfeiting his independence, the new curate succeeded in removing, although by slow degrees, the prejudice with which Mr. Marchmont had at first regarded him. Determined to fulfil his mission earnestly and well, he had become a favourite not only with the wealthy, but with the poorer class of the community, whose wants he endeavoured to relieve, and by whose sick-beds he was a constant visitor, preparing them by solemn words and fervent prayer to meet their end, or, when recovered from their sickness, to remember what he had said to them in their time of trial and distress. But however constant in his visits,

either of consolation or advice, of prayer or caution; however eager to do good, there was always one before him, sitting by the sick peasant's bed, or ministering to his wants—one who never waited for the occasion to do good, but sought it out; sought it where true distress and poverty lie hid in holes and corners, shunning the broad stare of vulgar pity, or shrinking from soliciting the aid of which they stand in such need. Come when he would, that young girl was there before him, soothing the patient's weary pillow, or reading words of peace and hope by the low bedside.

The moment the latch was raised, and the curate's shadow darkened the cottage doorway, Florence would rise from her seat, and with a few kind words and a gentle motion of her head, pass out to visit some one else, as ailing and as sick, only to be surprised again and leave, as she had left before, the way prepared and ready to the curate's hand. His office to do good was still before him, but he found his task an easy one, for Florence Dormer had already spoken comfort and administered relief before he came.

In a half doze over the fire sat the rector, while on a low stool at his feet sat Florence, looking up in the old man's face, watching him as he slept, or

trying to engage his attention when he roused himself out of his short, heavy slumbers, by matters she thought likely to interest him, and so prevent his falling into a doze again. Her hand was locked in his, and her gentle, earnest talk stole softly on the old man's drowsy senses as he sat, half-recovered from his nap, and only conscious of the murmuring, pleasant voice that poured its whispered accents in his ear. Every now and then he would turn his eyes and look at her—look at her as a father would look on a favourite child—then place his hand upon her head with a silent blessing, and go dozing off to sleep again.

She had been talking to him long and earnestly of the many wants and cares she had found among the tenants of the village and the poor cottagers living on the outskirts of the parish; had pointed out how much they stood in need of consolation in their days of trouble, and of assistance to help them on through the heavy winter time that would be soon on them. She had prevailed on him at last to listen to her, and so far improved the opportunity as to tell him of the drunken and intemperate doings of Ned Pullen, whose ill-usage of his wife had become a scandal to the neighbourhood, and ought to be corrected.

“Will you talk to him, Mr. Marchmont?” she said, in her low, gentle way. “He may be ashamed, perhaps, if you tell him of his cruelty to one who works and toils for him, yet only gets ill words and shameful blows in return for all her sacrifices. He may be ashamed, perhaps, if you tell him what you have heard—he may attend to you, though he won’t mind any one else.”

“Mind me, child! no more than he would old Saunders; and as for his wife, does not Bridget give her all my shirts to make, and odd things to do I haven’t even a guess of?”

“But that is not enough to keep her in constant work, and even if it were, she cannot keep house and home upon such poor drudgery as hers, with no husband to help her on. We must do something else, Mr. Marchmont, we must all do something else, to relieve the poor woman’s sufferings.”

“Well, well, we must think about it; we must think about it,” said the rector, going off to sleep again.

“And at once,” urged Florence, “we must obtain something besides work for her—we must get some money to help her on with.”

“Eh! Money!” cried the rector, opening his eyes, as though there were not the least suspicion

of sleep about them. "What on earth can a poor woman like that want with money?"

"To pay the rent. She is in arrears with the squire's bailiff; and what she had saved towards it, Pullen robbed her of a night or two ago—broke open her box where she had hidden it, and in spite of all she could say or do, went off to squander her hard-earned savings in rioting and drinking. Unless she has some assistance, the poor woman is utterly ruined; she will be seized upon for rent, and Squire Blakeborough——"

"Ay, ay! I know; he'll turn her out after the broken box. Well, well, we must think about it; for Martin Blakeborough—let me see—how many Blakeborough's wives have I churchied, and—and—how many buried? Let me see."

While they thus sat and talked, a shadow passed across the window, as a man's figure paced slowly along the gravel walk towards the entrance of the house; a few minutes afterwards a knock was heard at the room door, and old Saunders put his head inside, and announced Mr. Stapleton. Florence rose as the curate entered the apartment; and the rector, who had only half got through his list of churchings, christenings, and burials, closed his eyes again, and nodded over the fire.



The curate's face flushed slightly, when he saw Florence standing by the side of the rector, her hand placed gently on his shoulder in an attitude of still repose, as though her slender form could shelter and protect that sleeping man, her tiny hand preserve him from the least approach of harm. Turning his deep-sunken yet searching eye, first on the slumbering rector, then on the fair girl standing by his side, a gentle smile stole over his pale, thoughtful countenance, startling the shadows of the hidden grief that lay upon it, through which the feeble smile came peeping out, then faded away, and left his face as dull and clouded as before. At last he said, speaking in low earnest tones, "As usual, Miss Dormer, you are here, as everywhere else, before me."

"I have been sitting later than I thought. It is dusk, and I must be going home. My father will be wondering what has become of me."

Florence was on the point of taking up her mantle, when the curate, as if to prolong her visit, said, with a nervous trembling in his voice, "Do not let me drive you away, Miss Dormer, you wish to speak with the rector, or perhaps you have already spoken to him, and left nothing for me to do. You have been speaking——"

“Of Dame Pullen,” interrupted Florence, betraying by her manner a nervous trepidation too, although there was no apparent reason why either she or the curate should have changed colour when their eyes met; but they did.

The curate appeared to gather strength by her confusion, as he continued—“You are always earnest in doing good, Miss Dormer, and this poor woman’s necessities are sufficiently urgent to call for all your endeavours in her behalf.”

“Her rent must be paid, at all events; it is not much, and if Mr. Marchmont will only assist us with a little money——”

“Money! who wants money?” said the rector, opening his eyes with sudden wakefulness. The bare sound of the word had broken through his doze, and made him look about him with an inquiring and uneasy glance. “Oh, is that you, Mr. Stapleton, and Florence! I—I have been having my after-dinner nap, and—but who spoke about money?”

“Never mind that now,” interrupted Florence, throwing her mantle over her shoulders, and then tying the strings of her hat; “to-morrow will do, when I will come and see you again; only don’t sleep any more now, or you will have no rest at night. I will tell Saunders to send up

your tea, and to come and sit with you. He will rouse you a little. Good night, good bye!" She kissed the old man's forehead, and, as he began to doze again, gave him a playful shake, and was in the act of leaving the apartment, after wishing the curate "Good evening," when the latter advancing towards her, said, "You must permit me to see you on your way home, Miss Dormer. It will be dark soon, and we have too many of the squire's wild companions about the place to make your walk a safe, or pleasant one, without some protector. Pray allow me to see you to the Hall."

There was nothing unreasonable in the offer, yet it had the effect of making Florence colour up; while the curate turned slightly paler than usual, or was at all necessary, when making a proffer of such ordinary service; for the road between the rectory and the Hall was dark and lonely, and to a young girl like Florence, anything but a pleasant walk now the night was coming on. She thanked him in her own quiet way, summoned the old clerk, told him to order tea, and to keep the rector from dozing over the fire, and amuse him till he went to bed. "You will think of all this will you, Saunders, like a good soul as you are?"

“Yes, miss,” said Saunders, who would have said “yes” to anything she asked him; “I’ll see to it, don’t you fear. Good night, miss; good night, sir!” And old Saunders, who had been parish clerk from about the same time Mr. Marchmont had succeeded to the living, watched them along the garden walks, through the shrubbery, and so out at the lodge gate. Florence with her mantle drawn closely about her, and the new curate walking at some little distance from her side.

The clerk stood looking after them until his old eyes could no longer discern their retreating figures, then nodding his small bald head, and muttering to himself, he said—“Ah, I have seen more unlikely things than that come to pass in my time!” Hobbling his way inside the house he closed the door, had the tea brought up by Bridget—who would as soon have thought of going to church with her apron on, as letting any one else carry up the rector’s tea; ate his buttered toast, chatted of old times, or anything he thought would amuse his master, and after Bridget had taken down the tea-things, played backgammon with him for the remainder of the evening, until it was time for all sober-minded people to go to bed.

Meantime Florence and her companion walked on in silence for some time, the old familiar road

growing more indistinct and misty at every step, while glancing through the cottage windows the bright red fires threw out their cheerful glow, tinting the twilight, and gleaming across their path.

The morning had been fine and clear for the late season of the year, but as the day advanced, the air had grown cold and chilly. Florence wrapped her mantle round her, as the sighing wind moaned through the leafless trees, and moved along in silence by the side of the curate. Neither of them had spoken since they left the rectory, whence old Saunders had watched them on their way, walking some little space apart. At length the curate said—

“I am afraid, Miss Dormer, our musings turn on the same subject; you are thinking, as I am, of the good rector—of Mr. Marchmont.”

“Yes,” replied Florence, waking from her dreamy reverie, “his health is breaking fast; he grows more feeble and more helpless every day.”

“This constant desire to sleep, and this half-wandering in his mind at times, are bad omens,” resumed the curate, speaking in the same low tone of voice.

“I am afraid they are, and Saunders must keep a watchful eye on him. We can’t afford to

lose so kind a patriarch as dear old Mr. Marchmont." And then again after a pause she added, "It is very strange, but his love of money seems to grow stronger on him every day."

"A ruling passion is always stronger as the mind gets weaker. Mr. Marchmont was at all times fond of money, was he not?"

"I believe so. But we only came to live at the Hall two years ago, and can therefore only judge of his earlier habits by report."

"I am even a more recent dweller in this neighbourhood than yourself. I have not been here quite six months, yet the rector and his habits appear as familiar to me as if I had lived in the place all my life."

"But you have surely been in this part of the country before?" said Florence.

"Indeed!" replied the curate, while a still deeper shade fell across his face. "May I ask what reason you have for thinking so?"

"Because you seem to know every place and the names of everybody for miles and miles about, as well as if you had been born here. There is not a circumstance connected with the neighbourhood but you are acquainted with; and I often see the old men of the village, and the old rector too, if it comes to that, looking at you as though

they could not quite make up their minds as to whether they had seen you before or not."

"I bear a resemblance, perhaps, to some one they may have cause to remember. Likenesses you know are common enough, too common to be a matter of surprise."

"That may be, and yet I could not help noticing, for it struck me as being so singular——"

"May I inquire what it was?"

"When you came to the Hall the other day, to see my father on some good errand of your own, you found your way to the library as easily as I could, although you had no one to show you where it was."

"Old houses, Miss Dormer," replied the curate, after a momentary pause, "have a strange charm for me. I have lived among them all my life, and have a great liking for a good old English dwelling. Besides, you know the ground plans of most of the houses of the period in which the Hall was built are very much alike."

"Yes; but the library is at the end of a long passage, through the breakfast-room; and quite on the other side of the house, through half a dozen other passages and rooms. How you ever could have found that out unless you had known it before, I cannot understand."

“ Oh, that is nothing,” replied the curate, with a slight confusion in his manner. “ I knew a house exactly like it once.”

“ And that house——”

“ Had once a mistress like yourself, and like you, touched with gentleness and love to all. Like you she sought out sickness, cheered and comforted the poor patient by her tender nursing, her ever welcome gifts ; guiding the strong, and teaching the unwise and erring how the right way of life is always straight, the evil only crooked : her own example prompting them to try and lead as good a life, or follow in the steps the holy lesson she would read to them pointed out. Like you she ministered unto their daily wants, their spiritual welfare. But there came a change. Her only child, her son, on whom that mother's heart was fixed, as by his good were bounded all her hopes and fears—her son was sent to college to gather wisdom with his task, hoping that in his riper years he might become a man of mark and likelihood. Away from her, her tender nurture was forgotten, wasteful riot and pleasant evil weaned his mind from thoughts of her and home. Yet still that mother's heart beat on, and high in hope presaged his future honours.”

“ And he forgot all these ?”



“ He did. Forgot his mother’s patient watching, his father’s care. Tempted to his undoing by bad associates he squandered his patrimony, and became their ruin.”

“ Did you know him ?” asked Florence, with a look of pained anxiety.

“ Once, not now, for he is changed from what he was. Lost to himself and to the world, no one knows him now. To save his name from stain or the impeachment of a wrong his parents sacrificed their whole possessions, and in their tenderness and love sold the old house—that was so like your own—to pay his debts, and preserve him from the consequences of his folly and his crime ; deprived themselves of comforts and of station, content to bear their adverse fortunes with a smile, so long as they could shelter him, or save him from himself. And when they died, the son was a beggar ! The prodigal had no fattened calf to welcome him to what might else have been his home, for house and land were gone, and they who loved him had passed away as well. They died, and never knew the agony of that son’s mind—his agony and repentance, a repentance that came too late to save, an agony that must endure for ever.”

“ Poor mother and poor father ! I had almost

said 'poor son!' " murmured Florence, with a low sigh.

Both were silent for a time, while the curate's brows contracted as though his mind were oppressed with a load of thought he could not fly from. Florence was thinking too, wondering if that son he talked of were walking by her side, and if the tale he told her were of himself.

"And yet"—he went on speaking with an abstracted air—"with no directing hand to guide their steps or warn them from the consequence of their passions, how many fall as he did—how many nursed as he was by over anxious care forget, or if they do not forget, turn aside from, the love of those whose easy kindness overlooked the first offence, and, unwilling to correct from first to last, forgave him all."

They had reached the entrance of the avenue while the curate was yet speaking. Throwing open the lodge gate he paused, then in a low sad voice wished his companion "Good night!" and stood watching her retreating figure going towards the house.

As he thus stood and paused, glancing up the long avenue of huge old beech trees, set in a row on either side, their gaunt trunks appeared arrayed like sentinels to bar his passage

down that silent grove, stretching their giant arms athwart that sombre arch as if to wave him back, and shut his presence from them ; while overhead the skeleton branches intertwined their twisted boughs to cast a deeper shadow on the walk, and make him fear to venture in its shade. And there beyond, at the far end of that dark avenue, closed in by a circling belt of evergreens, intense and black in leafy contrast, the old Hall itself looked at him from its lit up casements as with so many red and angry eyes, flashing their vengeful fury at him, frowning him back, and wondering at his presence.

## CHAPTER V.

### CHASE HOUSE.

THE night set in dark and stormy ; the gusty wind swept over the stretched-out Black-down Hill, nipping the passenger to the bones. Nothing could keep that wind away, or afford a shelter against its biting chill. It found its way through coat and muffler, numbing the hands, and urging the wayfarer to quicken his speed and seek a refuge from the blast that from the icy regions of the north rushed fiercely by, while overhead the clouds rolled tumbling on, their dense dark vapours broken, and wild, and rough, until at last a rising bank of cloud shut out both moon and stars, and earth and sky were mingled into one—the dull pall of night shrouding all nature in its deep impenetrable gloom.

Yet still the wind rushed by, while the moon rising again over the top of a huge cloudy mountain, sat on its silver edge ; the fleecy vapours scudding across her shining face, shading her for a time with a transparent veil, only to show her

fitful brightness more light and glorious, when their misty hue had passed, leaving a space of dark blue sky, in which she shone, the silver goddess of the night.

And there beneath her cold and frosty beam, backed by the frowning downs, stood old Chase House, an ancient structure of the early part of the sixteenth century, built under the protecting shelter of Blackdown Hill, and bosomed in the midst of mighty trees that, from the rising ground beyond, belted it round and hid it from the view.

But Martin Blakeborough had no taste for antiquarian lore, and his ancestral house had no charms for him beyond the accommodation it afforded to himself and friends. He had no reverence for this fine old relic of the past, or ever wished to trace the secret ways which, in his father's time, had been explored, leading from the priest's secluded chamber through narrow staircases, threading behind the wainscot of the rooms; or to dive into the vaulted passages, or the gloomy dungeon, built in the solid stone of the foundation.

The ancient moat, that once had circled round the place, was now dried up, or filled to a level with the surrounding ground, except in places where the concealed channels through which the water

had been conveyed from the neighbouring hills could still be traced, but useless now, choked up, and broken. The moat, and all the outer methods of defence, had long since disappeared, or had been removed to make room for modern improvements, in times when civil wars were no longer to be dreaded, and private mansions had ceased to be fortified against the attacks of disbanded soldiers, or the assault of regular and more formidable troops. Scattered over the length and breadth of English land, houses as old, and with the remains of fortifications still about them, lie dotted over their several shires. The moon that once had glimpsed upon the band of armed men, now shone upon that grass-grown courtyard and the crumbling walls of old Chase House, lighting the windows up, and glancing through those dark and silent rooms, pannelled half way up, and carved with many a strange device of curious workmanship. Another moment, and a mass of cloud shut out her beams, and over the heavens spread their leaden hue, rising like storm-clouds, while the wind blew colder still, as drifting spots of snow came flickering down in scattered specks of gleaming white.

Suddenly there came a ringing shout, as the thoughtless rioters within the house grew tipsy

over their punch, and pledged each other in brimming glasses, telling impossible tales of wild adventure, or of exploits in the hunting-field; their drunken mirth and boisterous merriment frightening the shrinking form watching from that garden's gloom the lights within, wondering if he would come and seek her where she nestled in the bushes growing along the path. There she lay crouching, and scanning with eager eyes each figure as it passed across the lit-up window, in hopes it might be the one she sought. But Martin Blakeborough had forgotten, or had neglected his appointment—had never once thought of her, perhaps; of the poor unhappy girl whose love was all she had left to give, and even that was slighted now!

The bitter lesson had yet to be learned, and the disappointed girl went on her way towards her father's cottage, which she had left by stealth, as she had often left it by stealth before. Better for her, she now began to think, if she had never quitted its honest shelter—had never left her father's side, to seek the love of Martin Blakeborough! She had waited, watched in vain; but he had other thoughts to engross him now; had other pleasures, other loves, perhaps. As one by one these sad reflections came across her mind,

Nelly turned, with a grieved and disappointed spirit, towards the Quell. Her feet moved quickly, but her doubting mind almost tempted her to retrace her steps in hopes of meeting him; and then, again, her disappointed love would urge her on, thinking to make him feel her absence bitterly, as she felt his. And as she went along, the drifting snow came down, and the night air pierced through and through the thin covering she had cast about her.

No moon, no star was visible; but a dull heaviness spread overhead, the white, fleecy drift falling about her, while the snow-flakes drove in her face, and covered her poor garments with a spotted shower. But snow or piercing cold had no effect on her. She had a burning sense of wrong within, which shut out all, and made her careless of the way she went, or if that way were rough or smooth. *He* was not there to make that way a cheerful one, and without his voice to whisper in her ear, all things were cheerless, all paths desolate.

And as she walked, the thoughts of times gone by came over her—of the old squire, and that gentle wife who had made his name and hers a blessing to the needy, and, by constant good, secured the prayers of all. How had she, that



weak and failing girl, returned that nurture and that care? How had she repaid that early teaching and that mother's love (it was so fond, it seemed to that poor motherless girl as tender as a mother's)? Had she not neglected, forgotten her counsel and her womanly instruction—turned aside from the straight path to seek in crooked ways a short-lived happiness that, in the end, leads on to ruin, to disgrace, to death! Press and press with all your strength, your little hand can never still the aching throb that swells and heaves as it would lift a mountain! Beat on, poor heart, and press it as you will, your little hand cannot allay the wracking pain, or still its nervous beating.

She had walked some distance—her uncertain steps leading her without a purpose or a care, anywhere, so it were away from where she was—and with downcast eyes moved quickly on, when through the falling snow, striping the darkness with its gleaming white, a sudden light streamed forth, and there before her stood the curate's cottage, from which the light had come.

No sound was there, no noisy mirth, and no unholy tryste to tempt him forth. She paused in her quick walking, and listened, in hopes of hearing some deep utterance, some breathed prayer,

to break the stillness of the calm, and make her take her hand away from that poor heart and clasp it with the other one in mute and silent prayer. But no ! the light alone streamed forth, and creeping forward, Nelly peeped through the lattice, and saw the curate reading by the light of his lamp. She looked, and the more she looked, thought of that peaceful study, and the good it brings, compared with wasteful riot and intemperance. Oh ! could she call that peace her own, shut out the errors of the past, and for the time to come sit down and seek, as he did, comfort in the books he read. But that she could not do ; her brain was in a whirl, and all that jealous mind was bent on wayward thoughts, as her heart was fixed on Martin Blakeborough.

She turned and ran. She could not walk ; she felt it was only by running, swiftly and silently, as though afraid the very night should hear her, she could shut out that sight, and dare to think again of what she was, and what she might have been ! She ran, and in the distance looked behind, but the light had passed away. She was in the dark road once again, and had no guiding star to lead her on, or show her where to go.

The sound of murmuring voices, and the sharp

snap of broken twigs trodden on by approaching footsteps, made her shrink behind the shadow of a pile of brushwood, as she saw some six or seven men, with guns and snares, come silently on their way. Ned Pullen was in the midst, his tall bulky figure swaying from side to side, as though the fumes of the "Hind Head" ale had not quite passed away, or that still fresher draughts of the home-brewed, had made his steps heavy and more pondrous than ever, as he came to a sudden halt when nearly opposite the stack of wood behind which Nelly crouched. She had half a mind to run away at once, rather than stand the chance of being found concealed and watching by those reckless men, who, with drunken Pullen at their head, were fit for any mischief, and would do it too, without regret or scruple. She was on the point of darting from her shelter, when the sound of Pullen's voice took all her strength away, as he shouted to his dog, who had strayed a little from his side, and now ran scenting round the pile of brushwood. "What's in the wind, you blind-eyed brute, runnin' and puttin' your nose into a lot of sticks as is only fit to burn? You'd better be quiet, 'afore I make you, with a kick as'll pitch you over it."

The lurcher stopped within a few yards of

Nelly, uttered a low growl, then ran back again to skulk behind its master's heels, reminded by his angry tone of what he might expect if he disobeyed orders, and commenced wagging his stump of a tail, by way of showing how proud he was of the post of honour he occupied, yet at sufficient distance not to run unnecessary risks of a broken rib, by getting too near his amiable master's boot.

"Oh! what, you've had enough of it, have you?" roared Ned, pausing to look down at the dog, who blinked his eyes, and stood gazing up in mute petitioning at his brutal master, yet glancing towards the pile of faggots at every pause, with the evident wish of showing what he had found out, if he only durst. "You're beginnin' to show your airs, too, are you, like the rest on 'em, as don't know when they are well off, till their heads are broken? Now then, old sulky!" he cried out to a man who lagged behind in a sullen lounge, "you'll mind how you tries that game on me another time, or you'll get a tap worth two o'that, I'm thinkin'."

"What a feller you are for bawling, Ned," said one of the men, in a low, cautious voice; here are we out for a little quiet night work, and you make as much row as though you were

shoutin' for a wager. You'll have the keepers on us if you go on this way much longer."

"Keepers!" roared Pullen, in still louder accents, followed by a hoarse laugh, which was something unusual for him; "there's not a feller of the lot would come across Ned Pullen, nor across you neither, when there was poachin' about, and broken heads for them as tried to stop it. I only wish the squire and his fox-hunting pals would have a night of it with us, and fight for a barrel of ale. There's no such luck; so steady's the word, and we'll bag what we want in spite of him, or Dick Coombs either. He'd better keep out o' my way, or it'll be the worse for 'un. Keeper or no keeper, I'd knock 'un down like a log, if he tries any tricks on Ned Pullen."

Ned shouldered his gun, and followed by his companions, passed out of sight, while Nelly stole forth again with trembling steps, and watched the poachers further down the lane, going upon their desperate errand—those men who, in their reckless disregard for life and limb, would maim and murder any one who opposed them. It was then, and then alone, she thought of her father, who night by night went out to watch the squire's preserves. That poor, disgraced, and broken-hearted man, whose aged life

she had shadowed over with a deep set grief, a never-failing misery ! At last she thought of him, and of the wild and brutal men she had seen go by, and of the threats she had listened to. Should her father meet them, there would be a struggle, perhaps death ! Her father might be killed—killed in discharging his trust to that man who had brought disgrace upon his child ! She screamed in frantic terror as these thoughts came over her, then turned her flying steps again towards her cottage, in hopes her father might be there, fearful as she was at all other times to find him there, and she away ; anything rather than he should meet those men, and their brutal leader, Ned Pullen.

She ran at her full speed, but as she ran along that dark and dismal road, her heart beat, as a wild bird would beat its wings, striving to break its cage ; her limbs lost their strength, her head grew giddy, and she fell, pale and senseless as the snow on which she laid.

How long she laid there she never knew ; but when she opened her eyes, and her returning senses came to her, she felt herself lifted from the ground by strong, sinewy arms, and saw her father standing by her side. She shrunk away from him at first with fear and trembling, then remembering

what she had seen and fearful for his safety, held him closely to her and (feeling as a child should feel who loves her father, spite of all the wrong she had done to him) nestled on his breast, finding a refuge and a comfort next his heart.

Clasping her arms wildly about him, she held him as if to shelter him from harm, then drooped down again, weakened by the night's sad trial, and sank exhausted in his arms.

Dick had no time to question her. He could only wonder at finding her alone upon that dreary road, overcome by terror and alarm. With his daughter pressed against his heart, the old man folded his strong arms about her, patted her on the head, and with soothing words recalled her to herself again.

"What's happened, Nell?" said Dick. "What's brought you out at a time like this, when you ought to be asleep, Nell, in your bed, not tramping it on the open road. Mayhap you have been walkin' in your sleep, and got out here by chance."

"No, no, father," cried Nelly, forgetting everything in her fears for him. "Not by chance, or how could I have listened to their talk?"

"Who's talk?" asked Coombs, still coaxing and fondling her, not knowing what had happened, yet seeing by her excited manner that

something unusual had occurred to harass and distress her. "You have not been out with him, have you, Nell?" cried the old man, half drawing back to look, and read her answer in her face.

"No, no, not him, father; not him you mean." Nelly did not dare to name the squire. "I was out, father—out, walking, as I had no right to be—alone and wretched—when I saw Pullen, and fellows with him, who will kill you, father—kill and murder you if you go near them. I heard them say so, and you shall not go out to night."

"Oh, Ned, was it!" said Coombs, relieved of his more serious fears by the mention of Pullen's name. "I know what he's up to, and the chaps he's got with him, well enough. I was after them through the snow, to come upon them unawares, when I see'd you, as I thought a dead woman on the ground."

"I wish I was dead, father—dead and buried too, and you saved all care for me. But come home, father, home; you shan't go out this night, anyhow."

"You're crazy, lass, I think. How is a poor man like me to earn his bread if he doesn't do his duty in foul weather as well as fair? As to Ned, and his bullyin' ways, I'm used to 'em, and shan't catch cold with shiverin' at 'em—besides,



God's arm is a longer one, and a stronger one nor drunken Ned's, and will mind a man as does his duty honestly and well. So now home and to bed, Nell; you're pale and ill, wench, and have no call to be out in a night like this, which is only fit for your poor old father, and men like him, as is used to rough it."

In vain Nelly urged her fears for his safety; in vain she wept, and sobbed, and cried. Coombs had an iron will, and with his sense of duty strong about him, would have rushed, single-handed, into the midst of Pullen and his gang, and died among them rather than have neglected his trust. Perhaps he wished to die; perhaps Nelly guessed *why* he wished it: she knew well why she wished that she were dead herself.

Sadly she went along, the old men coaxing and comforting her until he reached his cottage in the Quell. He saw her safely inside, locked the door, put the key in his pocket, then turned out again into the cold night air to call his brother keepers up, and hurry after, upon the heels of Pullen.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE INTERVIEW.

THERE were no stirrers in the garden, no movement in the court-yard of old Chase House, no activity in the stables, where the tired horses rested in their stalls. The grooms were fast asleep, and all about there hung a lazy look, as though the house itself had been keeping late hours, and had not quite made up its mind to peep out of its sleepy windows before its time. The smoke curled from the twisted chimneys slowly and heavily; clung about the roof, then went off at last, only to tumble over the sides of the house, and make it look more gloomy and uncomfortable than before.

By and by from the distant kennel came the first sound of life and motion. The restless hounds yelped out their noisy cry, startling men and boys from their beds to bustle in and out the stables. The horses neighed, while the now busy grooms rubbed down their glossy sides, and amidst the general stir roused up the midnight

rioters from their late slumber, their bodies fevered by their overnight's debauch, their heads yet giddy with the fumes of punch, shouting out for morning drams, to enable them to sit upon their horses, and join the meet at some other squire's place, to risk their necks in desperate leaps, fighting and struggling which should be the first in, and win the brush, and, the day's excitement over, drink punch, and go to sleep again, then wake once more, and call for brandy, as they had done just now.

Baxter was the first to mount his horse—a thick-flanked, powerfully-built animal, that stood pawing the ground and tossing its head in evident impatience to be gone,—while his two companions climbed lazily into their saddles, with no very great alacrity, as though they would infinitely have preferred remaining where they were, to riding back to London ; but needs must when Jack Baxter had made up his mind, and while one of his friends, a flashily dressed young man, pulled his shirt frill from the lappets of his embroidered vest, the other hung jauntily over the side of his horse, and began praising the squire's claret, which he pronounced “as delicately a flavoured wine as he had ever tasted, and fit for a gentleman to drink. I hope you have got a good stock of it, Blakeborough,” he continued ; “and take

my advice, don't waste it on your hard-drinking fox-hunters, who know as much of the true flavour of claret as I do of brandy punch."

"All right, Bridgeman," replied his host, "there is enough left to last us for another bout or two, and I'll take care you are not cheated out of your share of it."

"Now then, Master Tom," cried Baxter, holding his horse in, and reining it back upon its haunches, "when you have done with the squire's claret, and Mike has left twiddling at his shirt frill, we'll be off. We have a long ride before us, and Martin will be glad enough to have a clear house; so let us show him our backs, like true friends should, now we have eaten and drunk him out of house and home. You'll be glad of a little quiet, after the week's frolic we have had with you, won't you, squire? unless you have a mind to come and try your luck in town, and win your hundred guineas back again."

"Sooner than you expect, perhaps," replied Blakeborough, "when you must put me in the way to some of your luck, Jack, or let me draw upon your bank for an odd thousand or two. Money I must have, and some of my friends among the Jews and lawyers must find it out for me."

“And then for my hundred, squire !” laughed his broad-chested friend, who had something of the build of his horse about him, and appeared equally impatient to be gone. After a few parting words, and a suggestion that his “bank was open to all comers,” and a thousand or two a mere nothing to him, provided he only knew where to lay his hands on them, Baxter touched the side of his horse and galloped off, followed by his companions ; the flashily-dressed Mike Garroway, evidently disinclined to hard riding, with his head throbbing from his overnight’s debauch, while Baxter galloped on as though he never knew what headache meant, but could carry away an over-dose of punch with as much impunity as his more sober companion, Bridgeman, could swallow a bottle of claret.

His other visitors had taken their departure at an earlier hour, and as the three horsemen rode on their way, waving their hands to him from the last rise in the bridle road, Blakeborough returned into the house to talk on private matters with his unbidden guest, who had come so suddenly upon him the day before, and prepare himself for the interview he had promised to his old friend and boon companion, Nic Upton.

Ill at ease, and dreading the meeting with his

early college chum, Blakeborough sat within his room. A nervous and uncomfortable feeling absorbed all his hitherto affected lightness of manner, which had cost him no little struggle to assume, knowing, as he did, that the presence of Nic Upton boded him no good, and that his unexpected visit was fraught with some secret peril, some hidden mischief he could not unravel. But meet it he must, come when it would, and now the place was freed from his other companions, Martin knew there was no help for it, and therefore prepared to face the worst, with the best grace he could.

The apartment in which he sat had a strange mysterious look of the old time, and like the rest of the chambers in the house, was carved and wainscoted throughout. The deep square mulioned windows, and the garden-ground beyond, had a pleasant look enough, but the dark oak of the panelling, imperfectly lighted through the stained and tinted glass, gave to the room a sad and melancholy aspect. The very pictures ranged upon the walls, hanging awry, and clouded with a dusty film, had a gloomy heavy look about them; the old books, thrown in careless heaps on the shelves of the wide book-case, were dark and dingy, their discoloured backs worm-

eaten and rusty, while everything about the place partook of the neglected character of the house, although this particular room was better kept than most of the apartments, and had a more comfortable and modern aspect than the rest of those cheerless and shut-up chambers.

Pondering over some open letters spread upon the table, Blakeborough leant his head within his hand, and sat gazing at them with an abstracted and bewildered air. He took them up, read them hastily, then threw them from him with an impatient gesture, as though a glance at their contents had satisfied him as to the nature of the correspondence. Starting from his chair he paced with rapid strides about the room, returned to his seat again, and then again went striding up and down, muttering to himself, and giving utterance to brief ejaculations of annoyance and pain. There was a mingled expression of rage and passion, of suffering and remorse, about his contracted brow, quivering lips, and restless eyes, that told the struggle going on within—a struggle he could not fly from, though he had not sufficient moral courage to face the difficulties that appeared to overwhelm him.

Speaking hurriedly to himself in suppressed, angry tones, at last he said—"And is this to be

the end? Eaten alive by that infernal Jew! that swindling Isaacs! Why, the old thief has had his money over and over again in interest, and yet he makes it out double what it was at first! And Lawyer Clam as well! I'll clam him, if I catch him! A cheating, sharking, squint-eyed fox! He'll never be satisfied until he has earthed himself in my land! But let him mind what he is doing, or I'll stop his running for him! And Isaacs, too! He'd drain the very blood out of me, with his Jewish roguery! But they had both of them better mind what they are about, or I may cry quits with them in a way they won't like."

His hurried movements, and the threats of vengeance uttered between his clenched teeth, appeared to relieve him of his suppressed rage, and nervous apprehension, as he sat staring into the fire with vacant, restless eyes, as though he half expected to see old Clam and Isaacs roasting there, in the shape of two red-hot cinders.

As he thus sat and gazed, busy in speculations what to do, and how to rid himself of the pressing claims pouring in upon him, Captain Nicholas Upton walked into the room. Blakeborough was too much occupied with his own painful thoughts to notice the entrance of the Captain, who moved into the apartment with a noiseless step, and,



finding himself unobserved, stood watching Blakeborough with a half sinister smile ; his cold gray eye lighted up with a sly confidence, forming a strange contrast to the huddled-up figure of his host, who, busy with his thoughts, sat in deep and fretful reverie.

Upton still stood and looked, while Blakeborough gazed into the fire on his imaginary Jew and lawyer, watching them burn and eat themselves away to dust and ashes. The sudden opening of the door, flung back upon its hinges to give due effect to the approach of Lucas, with his tray full of the necessary provision for the breakfast-table, made Blakeborough look round ; when he became, for the first time, aware of the presence of the Captain. He knew well enough he had been watching him, by the almost imperceptible smile that still hung about the corners of his mouth, and shrunk away before the air of confidence and power he assumed, when Upton walked up to him, held out his hand and said, " Good morning, squire !"

Blakeborough took the proffered hand, then let it fall again. His manner was cold and nervous, and marked by an absence of that cordiality usually existing between host and guest. He merely said, " Good morning," then turned towards the

window, as if seeking some excuse to recover the necessary ease and composure he saw so finely developed in his friend the Captain.

Lucas was busy at the breakfast-table, placing knives and forks, and plates and dishes, in exactest order. But that was mere child's play to him; he could do all that without winking, yet have sufficient time to glance first at his master, then at the Captain,—who had ridden there upon the squire's horse the overnight, and had done nothing but storm at the servants and order them about, as though he were come to pay them their wages, and take to the estate at the same time. He had even had the temerity to swear at Lucas! at that man, who once was under-footman to a Duke! But Lucas was so fully alive to his own position, and so sensible of what was due to him from his aristocratic association, he did not even condescend to answer him, but let him storm, and swear, and bluster, while he hid himself half way down the stairs, and pretended not to hear him; although the stranger was evidently hand and glove with his master, treated him almost with as much familiarity as he had treated himself, and appeared bent on ordering the whole household—its master included—just as he thought proper.

Lucas had eyes to see all this—they glanced

first at one, then at the other, though all the time pretending to be engaged with nothing else but the nice arrangement of the breakfast table ; at which, after a brief pause, the Captain and his master sat, the Captain with an easy swaggering nonchalance, and Blakeborough only in part recovered from his sullen, inhospitable manner.

“How did you sleep, Martin ?” asked the Captain, helping himself from the dish nearest to him, while Lucas stood behind his master’s chair, and never once offered to assist his guest as he used to assist the Duke, but kept eyeing him, and watching him, as though he had not quite made up his mind whether to treat him as an equal, or show him the least of all possible respect and consideration.

“I asked you how you slept, Martin ?” repeated the Captain ; “I suppose badly, for you don’t seem quite awake now.”

“Not so well as I could wish ; I drank too much punch last night, and you know of old, punch and I were never too good friends ; my head was never a good one for drinking.”

“It has seen tolerable service though, and has gone through some roaring nights before now,” replied the Captain, assisting himself to his egg and toast.

“Get me some brandy, Lucas,” said his master; “a glass of it, in a cup of strong coffee, may do me good, and perhaps take away the uncomfortable sensation I feel.”

Upton half raised his eyes to him, then went on eating without taking further notice. Lucas in the meantime brought the brandy from an old buffet at the far end of the room, and placing it on the table, looked at his master and his friend with an odd expression of countenance. There was evidently some connection between the two he did not quite understand, and which he felt a strong inclination to find out. It appeared to him as though his master and his friend had changed places, and that the new comer had more power in the house—if he chose to exercise it—than even his master himself.

Blakeborough poured out a tolerably large glass full from the brandy flask, and stirring it in his coffee, drank a good draught of it, while the Captain raised his eyes, and said—“A hair of the same dog, eh? There is some virtue in it, I am told, for a squeamish stomach. It helps to quiet the nerves, I suppose.” He uttered the last words carelessly enough, but Blakeborough appeared to read his meaning, as he glanced across the table at him with a

heightened colour in his cheeks, and rather an angry expression on his brow.

They remained silent for a few minutes ; when Upton, raising his eyes once more towards Blakeborough, met the suspicious, prying glance of Lucas, fixed upon him with a peculiar slyness, that made him almost wince. There was a leer of such unutterable cunning about the sharp, piercing eyes that opened upon his own, the Captain shrunk before them, and for a moment sunk his own upon the table, as though he had met an expression in those eyes quite capable of understanding his thoughts, and reading them backward, if need be. A minute was enough. He lifted up his head again,—this time carefully avoiding the man's eyes,—and stormed out, “What are you staring there at? Leave the room; we don't want you!”

Lucas did not care for that; he evidently wanted *him*, and was determined to avail himself of the earliest opportunity of cultivating a more intimate acquaintance too; but, as it would not do to run counter to orders given in so peremptory a tone, and which his master did not seem to be in a condition to correct, he merely bowed (the slightest of all possible bows), then with a jaunty air shifted his place from behind his master's

chair, carried off the brandy flask towards the buffet, placed it inside, and kept within the shelter of the opened door, in hopes his presence might be unnoticed, and that Captain Nicholas Upton and his master would commence explaining matters to his entire satisfaction.

He was so far successful that Upton ate on in silence for some time, finished his meal,—which had been rather a hearty one,—then throwing himself back in his chair, said, with a self-satisfied air, “Well, Martin, I am glad to see you in such good case, which is more than I am, I can tell you.”

Lucas's ears were on the stretch. He was about to reap the reward of his happy control over his temper, in not having replied to the Captain as his position justified, when Blakeborough placed his finger on his lips, in mute warning to his friend; who, looking for a cause, beheld the legs of Lucas peeping below the door of the buffet, behind which he had hoped to have remained unnoticed.

The Captain raised his voice (this time to a perfect storm), and called out, “Didn't I tell you to go?—so go at once, and be hanged to you, or I'll pitch you out of the window!”

There was no mistaking this threat, which,

coming from a man holding rank in the army—a man six foot high, and Lucas but a civilian, after all, and several inches under the Captain's altitude—left him no room to dispute. So the inquisitive domestic—whose desire was to live in peace with all men and never grow combative, except with good six inches on his side of the question—the judicious Lucas thought an honourable retreat might, after all, be safest, at the same time without compromising his dignity. His master, it was true, remained silent, and looked, as Lucas thought, as though he had rather a fancy for his company ; but, as he said nothing to the contrary, and as the Captain half rose from his chair, with the intention of trying if the window opened easily, Lucas showed his town breeding and his superior education, by walking—still with a gracious smile upon his face—out of the room, and listened attentively at the door.

Upton sat for a few minutes in silence, while the satisfied Lucas glued his ears to the keyhole, and, with his hearing finely tutored, remained in anxious expectation of knowledge cheaply bought, and wisely gathered. After allowing sufficient time for Lucas to settle himself to his task, and become absorbed in hope, the Captain, wise, and instructed in the ways of life, moved noiselessly

towards the door, and throwing it open with a sudden swing, hoped to have taken the offender in the very act of eaves-dropping. But Lucas had tried the experiment too often to be surprised by any improper interruption of this sort, and before the door was fairly opened, had availed himself of a precipitate flight downstairs, and so got out of the Captain's reach ; avoiding, as he wisely congratulated himself, a more disagreeable and more ignominious descent. This flight he happily accomplished, without any damage to himself, and left the Captain to return into the room, reseal himself in his chair, and then address the squire with the same careless indifference of manner he always assumed, as though nothing had occurred to ruffle the calm serenity of his temper, or put him out in the least.

"You keep your servants in good order here," said the Captain, settling himself with much contentment in his chair.

"What would you have me do?" replied Blakeborough, with a touch of irritability in his voice and manner ; "I could not keep the louts my father had about him when I came down here, or retain the servants who had grown old on the estate, and looked upon me as a sort of truant boy they had half a mind to whip for his bad con-



duct ; so as "Master Martin" did not quite suit my notions of squireship, I turned them off."

"A pretty change you have made of it, if I may judge from the sample who has just saved his neck by bolting downstairs. There is some trust, after all, between old servants and old masters, but these London moths (and this one is true to his breeding) would hang you for the sake of the rope and your old clothes. The worst thing a man can do is to put himself in any one's power, especially a servant's."

"Or a friend's," said Blakeborough, with a slight change of colour.

"You are right, for when such a friend wants your assistance, you feel you *are* in his power, even if he don't tell you so. Therefore, as I said before, never put yourself in any man's power." The Captain uttered this with his usual indifference, while Blakeborough sat looking at him with an uneasy expression, anxious, yet fearful of what was to come next.

"But we can't always help it, can we, Martin? For instance, as the case stands with us, I am as much in your power as you are in mine. There is this difference, truly, and this difference only, between us—I have nothing to lose, while you——"

"Have next to nothing," rejoined Blakeborough.

"Faugh! You have plenty—at least, it seems so—plenty to race with, at all events, and keep hounds, and hunters, for such rakehelly fellows as I saw here last night, who'll eat you up at a meal, and pigeon you, as you have pigeoned others. You know what I mean."

"Hush, Nic; or if you must speak at all of that, speak of the master hand that hunted up the game, and drew others in to follow on the scent. I would wish to shut that out, nor ever speak of it; at all events, not within these walls," said Blakeborough, looking almost beseechingly towards his companion.

"Why not? Must you only speak truth in a gaming-house or a police court?" replied Upton, staring at Blakeborough across the table, as though he had propounded the simplest of all simple questions to his host, who fell away before his look, as he stammered out, "What do you want?"

"You might guess that by my coming here, without telling. It is not very agreeable for a *friend* to be obliged to ask a friend for money."

"A friend!" rejoined Blakeborough.

"Yes, a friend! We have been fast friends

before to-day ; shared in the same pleasures, the same vices, and the same crimes. What more would you have a friend do ?”

Completely cowed by the quiet, off-hand way in which Upton spoke, Blakeborough sat and looked at him, as though all his former energy and dash were gone from him, and yet, resolved to make an attempt to break through his irresolution, he said—

“ I have no money.”

“ And what of that ? Men worth millions have ‘ no money,’ as they call it. But you have something quite as good—you have land.”

“ Well ?”

“ Land, that will get money ; you ought to know that as well as I do. Other men have been obliged to sell their land before to-day, whilst some I know of helped to cheat them of what it brought.”

“ Upton !”

There was a sudden flash in Blakeborough’s eyes as he started up at the table, and stood erect, with a threatening brow, before his friend, who, like a good fencer, kept his eye fixed on his antagonist, and let him shift his ground as often as he would, he knew his time and distance, and could control, by a slight but sure motion, all the vapouring the other made.

Blakeborough appeared to feel the quiet strength the other had, and the next moment sank into his chair subdued and overcome.

“Martin, this is folly, for either of us to speak, or look big. We know each other well—too well, perhaps—and must learn to help each other. The dice have fallen well for you, and with deuce ace, you have swept up all! And would you grudge a few counters to a friend to try his luck with, now he is out at elbows with the world? You would not have refused me once; now you shall not.”

“I repeat it, I have no money. I am as deep in the mire as you are. I am hedged about with debts; and, unless at the sacrifice of my estate, I shall soon be as poor as you are. Look here!” cried Blakeborough, pushing the letters he had been reading towards Upton, who did not even condescend to look at them; but determined as to the game he meant to play, said calmly, yet firmly—

“All this is nonsense, and won't pass with me. I must have help, and at once. Do you want to be told the means I have to make you help me? I, who have lived abroad upon my wits, been hunted far and near, whilst you have lived the life of a snug gentleman, instead of

tramping it with me ; not daring to show my face for fear some sharp-eyed Bow Street runner should think it worth his while to lay his hand on me. Two years I have lived abroad, or dodged about the streets at night on a stolen visit ; whilst you, like a good son, as you were, succeeded to your father's land, and lived upon the fat of it, when I have sometimes wanted bread. But I have returned once more ; and by the aid of some friends in town have ridden down to see you. By Jove ! but you have a fine place of it—you ride the best horses, keep the best company, and are, no doubt, a credit to the county, or fame belies you."

The Captain chuckled as he uttered the words, that brought a burning flush to the pale cheeks of Blakeborough, who added—

"A credit ! a curse, you mean ! and all through you—you, who tempted me, when a raw lad, into the ways you had lived and gloried in ! Moulded me, like a piece of wax, to what you chose to shape me to, till I became——"

"A perfect master of the art of cheating !" continued Upton, finishing the sentence with a sneer.

"Almost as perfect as yourself—you who, with the devil's aid to back you, took advantage of my impetuous temper, and ungoverned passions,

to make me your tool, your ready instrument to do with as you pleased. Did you not—for truth must now be spoken—even in my early college life, wean me from my studies, and tempt me on to vice, by making it easy to me? instructed me in gaming, and taught me how to break a mother's heart, by neglecting all I should have learned for midnight riot, and abuse of trust and honest dealing——”

“And a good pupil I had, too,” interrupted Upton, leaning back in his chair.

“I grant all that. You were a wise instructor, and I fell into the net you spread for me, without a struggle. But the end soon came. My father cast me off, returned my letters, and refused to see me, through you, and the shame I brought on him and his. He could not read a public print without my name and yours—they always ran in couples—being published as held to bail for midnight brawls or gambling riots. And, worst of all, that night——”

“Well, what of that?”

“That night which broke my mother's peace, sent her to the bed she never left alive, with a sick, aching heart, when she found her son's friend detected in an open cheat, and her child's hand stained with blood!”

“ You met him fairly, and you had the luck of it, that’s all.”

“ And as he fell weltering in the blood, I felt I was a murderer ! With his closed eyes he appeared a second Abel slain, and Heaven’s vengeful spirit seemed to stamp Cain’s curse upon my brow.”

“ He lived for all that, and you——”

“ Have never forgotten, never slept, without that look of his to haunt me. Yet what a joy to find I had not killed him ! Had I, I should have killed you afterwards ; I would, as Heaven made me ! You, who led me on to this ; cheated him with false dice, and the cheat found out, had not the courage to defend the wrong you did.”

“ Of course not, never throw a chance away ; I never do.”

“ But forced a greater crime on me, to fight and murder for you. And not content with such a wrong, forged his name to bills which ruined him and his, before the cheat was proved, which would have sent you to the gallows.”

“ It might have done, had they caught me ; and a spruce squire too, whose neck shall mount as high as mine when halters come in fashion. What ! do you think I am such a tame hound as to hunt for you, and, you not share the loss as

well as gain? Not I! If Nic Upton is a cheat and forger, Martin Blakeborough is a cheat and forger too."

"'Tis false!" and Blakeborough, furious in his wrath, looked as though he would have struck the other down.

"It may be, but who'd believe it if I denounced you? We always *ran in couples*, you know; and there are dozens left to prove you lent a helping hand, and pocketed your full share of what was won by true or *false dice*, as the case might be. One word for all, and one is as good as fifty. You shared the spoils; you shall share the halter if it comes to me. I have already put the proofs into safe hands, and if Nic Upton is taken, let Martin Blakeborough look to himself."

"Proofs—what proofs?"

"Do you think if I could forge *his* name, I could not forge your name as well? All's done to make all safe; and your friend Baxter will tell you—for he knows me of old—that Nic Upton is not a man to be trifled with."

"Baxter!"

"Ay, Baxter! Do you suppose I will stand by, and see my old helpmate roll in luxury, while I hide in a garret? See him ride the country



round, whilst I sneak from Bow Street runners, when with my finger I could point out a landed squire quite as fit to grace a rope or the colonies as myself? Not I! And so take your choice, for, by the light above us, I'll be as good as my word!" cried Upton, dashing his fist upon the table, as if to give assurance to his words.

Blakeborough stood fronting him for a while, and looked as if he would have fastened on his throat. At this moment Lucas came in at the door, when, by a mighty effort, he controlled his passion, and resumed his seat.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE INTERRUPTION.

LUCAS entered the room, where he stood looking with doubting and suspicious eyes ; and on Upton demanding, “ What in the devil’s name he wanted ? ” did not even condescend to notice his inquiry, or satisfy him as to the particular introduction he referred to, but addressing his master, said—

“ Mr. Dormer has sent to say, sir, he should be happy to see you, sir, with his compliments, as his lawyer has brought the papers all the way from London, and he’s come down on purpose to see you, sir.”

This message Lucas delivered with a bolt, upright air, as though he felt himself degraded by the service he performed, and that a country squire and his friend were quite beneath the notice of a man who had waited on nothing less than a Viscount, and in palmy days had been under-footman to a Duke ! Lucas delivered his message, and with that fine insight into human

nature, which he was at all times anxious to improve, eyed his master and his friend with an inquisitive glance, as though willing to add to his studies on the spot. This pleasing opportunity was, however, denied him, when Blakeborough told him to inform the messenger "he should be at the Hall in an hour."

What was Lucas to do? This was a point-blank message, and how was he to delay the delivery? The breakfast things were evidently done with, and hoping to pick up some stray crumbs of information, since the more direct medium of the keyhole was denied him, he piled the plates and dishes in a heap, and busied himself for the short time he was allowed, in their removal.

Without a word, Upton rose from his chair, then opening the door, advanced towards the obtrusive Lucas, who, with a pile of dishes in his hands, edged round the table, and shot out of the room, just as the Captain was ready to have ejected him from the apartment by a more summary, and certainly a more ignominious, process.

Not to be thrown off his guard by any outbreak of temper, the cool man of the world kept his own passions in fine subjection, as, advancing to the table at which Blakeborough still sat, he

said quietly, as though no ill-will had manifested itself between them—

“What papers were those your fellow spoke of?”

His more irritable companion grew calmer at the mild tone in which he was addressed, and answered gently, as a pupil would answer to his master's questioning.

“I have been obliged to sell the Manor Farm, so you see how hard I am pressed.”

“Oh! I heard that on my way here. And who may he be who has bought it?”

“A neighbour of mine who lives at the old house, which, in former times, belonged to a worthy man, whose son became his ruin, as I might have been my father's, had he had a heart as gentle, and eyes as blind to his son's faults, as his were. *My* father had an iron will, and pride to back him, the pride of his family name, which—I own it—was for the first time disgraced through me. His love of money, too, was always his chief passion; and though persuaded by her who is gone——” As he recalled the memory of his mother, his breast heaved, and his eyes grew dim. “He paid my debts once, that you know as well as I do; but those debts incurred again, he shut me from his heart; and

when my mother died, there was no voice to plead for my misdoings, no tears to melt him to forgiveness ! In that room she died ; that room which shall never be slept in by another whilst I live, nor have its sanctity invaded by a less gentle spirit than hers which fled there ! I never enter it but to kneel and pray.”

Blakeborough pointed to the doorway of a room opening from the one they were sitting in, and as he paced about the room, struggling with his emotion, Upton watched him with a calculating, watchful glance, speculating within himself the wayward passions of his victim, and his friend.

After a few turns about the room, Blakeborough spoke again. Pointing to the shut-up room, and addressing Upton, he resumed—

“When she was gone there was no one to intercede for the banished son. But he had found a *friend* who led him on to deeper infamy, and in whose wiles he now was thrown, without a hand to help, or counsel to persuade ; for my father closed his heart upon me, as he had closed his purse, and, shut within that room, as though her gentle spirit haunted it, he passed his time secluded from the world ; or wandered miles about, and, in his solitary walks, was never seen,

or if seen, was left to pass unnoticed on his way—it was his humour. His wife, the only soul he loved—his one undivided and unselfish love—was dead, and he had but his pride to live for—that and his money.”

“And his money?” interrupted Upton.

“He left to a distant relative, some youthful cousin who pursued a steady life, and never brought his pride in jeopardy as his son had done. The estate he could not will away, or that had gone as well. It was entailed on his next male heir; and, at his death, his unworthy son, whose penitence he would not listen to, and whose face he would not even see when he was dying, his son came down to bury him, and live upon his father’s land.”

“The land is melting after all, it seems,” said Upton, who still assumed an indifferent tone.

“My debts have forced me to it; and that last miss at Newmarket——”

“Oh, you can bet and race still, can you? I thought those things were forgotten with the friend who you say taught you how to race and game,” said Upton, with a slight curl of his sarcastic lip.

“But new friends have come with my estate; friends who are wise enough to know a gambler once is a gambler for ever. I have been too long

accustomed to vice to leave it off, when tempted by such friends as you had left me, who stick to me like burs. Who else have I to herd with? All men shun me; all men who have name and honour to their backs, all these have turned away from me; and when I came to take possession of the land my father's hate could not keep from me, I came to a dark house and sullen faces. There was no rejoicing to welcome me, no bonfires blazed, no tenants came around to congratulate my return, or make a flowery arch for me to walk beneath, to the home of my ancestors. And now I shun, as I was shunned. I treat them as they have treated me; and my tenants who kept aloof, and scowled at me, shall find that I can trample too," cried Blakeborough, with a sudden fury, his bad passions mastering his better nature, as he gave way to his roused temper and strode about the room.

"And quite right, too," said Upton. "Why should you stoop to such a paltry-blooded race as lie about in prim-set houses, and gather their small grandeur from the few acres they air their poor gentility upon? I would let them know that I dare lose more upon a single card than their whole patrimony is worth."

"I have; and before I'll stoop to them, I'll

pick my companions from all the scoffed and slighted men the county holds, worry them, and trespass on their land; and if they dare complain——”

“Trespass the more, and stand their actions, though you sell your land to pay the costs. I have heard as much. And you have commenced with the Manor Farm. How much did it fetch?”

“Not one half its value; but the Jews and lawyers offered less, and I had no time to cast about for purchasers, so I sold it to my neighbour, Dormer. He is a new comer in these parts, and has money enough to buy the sneaking gentry up for miles around.”

“I wish he'd lend me some of it, I should not have to trouble you then. But you see, Martin, how I am fixed. Were you in want, as I am, you should not ask of me in vain, if I had lands to sell or goods to borrow on.”

Finding there were other ways to win, Upton, like a wise general, adopted a different plan of attack, and shifted his position to the least wavering he saw in the weak defences of his doubting antagonist, whom he had turned and twisted to his will before, and thought by a little management he could twist and turn again.



“Ah, Nic ! if my father had but acted differently by me.”

“Just so ; or if you had acted differently by your father.”

“As it is, I have none to thank ; nothing to be thankful for.”

“I wish I had to be thankful for half as much,” rejoined Upton. “A fine estate, and plenty to help your friends with, and keep them quiet ; for instance, this money you are to receive. Now, five hundred guineas is all I ask, with them you may buy my silence, and ship me abroad, where I shall find means to help me at a push, and leave London and its scouts—to say nothing of its temptations and old vices—behind me ; whilst you live upon your land like a second Nimrod, hunt, shoot, and gamble to your heart’s content, while you have a guinea to lose or friends to win it. They’ll stick to you, never fear.”

“Five hundred guineas !” muttered Blakeborough to himself, “a clean half of what I am to receive, and the whole of that, and twice as much, is already bespoke by this infernal Jew. I had thought to have bought him over for a time with what you ask, and quiet old lawyer Clam with the other ; but as it is——”

“You’ll give your friend the preference,

especially if he holds you harmless from the quick-scenting gentlemen in law, who have not forgotten that little affair of ours two years ago. If they had only a guess of my being in England, or I were to open their eyes a little, they'd hunt us out like ferrets would a couple of rats."

"And you will promise<sup>s</sup>—swear—never to bring me in for that night's work?"

"Hand me five hundred guineas, and I'll promise or swear anything, and what is more, I'll keep my word. So, you see, I am a true friend after all."

"True to your own interests, you mean," said Blakeborough, with a slight bitterness of expression in his tone of voice.

"Ah, my friend! when you have lived as long as I have in the world, and known as many ups and downs, you'll find all men look after their interest more than anything else I know of. It lies at the bottom of all our actions. And let philanthropists say what they will, there is a wondrous fellowship of self in all men. But now that point is settled, and the five hundred guineas are as good as promised, tell me who is this rich man who is come into your county lately?"

"I have scarcely seen him; for I never mix with any of my neighbours, and so many years have

passed since I went from home, I know little of any one except by name ; and the old Hall he lives in has been so much altered since it fell into his hands the country people hardly know it for the same. His liking is for the past ages, and as nothing modern has a charm for him, he dresses up his house with all the antique furniture he can lay his hands on, and exists in a state of semi-barbarism, instead of living as a country gentleman should do."

"Has he a son?" asked Upton, with a strange expression of countenance.

"No ; luckily for him, perhaps, or his guineas might fly as fast as other fathers' guineas have flown before. He has but one child, a daughter."

"An heiress, eh ? and if so, why don't you look after her ? A good fortune, now, would pay old Clam and the Jew off too."

"What ! pay my debts with my wife's money ? Not I ! I have yet some little sense of honour left."

"Honour !" cried Upton, staring upon his friend as though the word were new to him ; "Honour ! then what becomes of all the honourable men who lay their coronets at the feet of tallow-chandlers' daughters, provided they have money enough to buy titled husbands to dangle

at their apron strings? Honour! why the best-blooded men in the whole land would shut their doors against you—or rather their wives' doors—at the bare mention of the word.” And the Captain laughed heartily—for him—as though he enjoyed the novelty of the jest.

“Well or ill blooded, I should not like to marry a wife to fling her fortune in my teeth, or be taunted by a daily reckoning of the debts she had paid for me.”

“Yet old Clam and Isaacs are troublesome creditors to deal with; troublesome perhaps as a scolding wife, and more difficult, you'll own, to silence. Between them, they may sweep your estate from you by mortgages, bills, and bonds. Once clear of them, and a fortune to your back, you might try your luck at Newmarket, and, who knows, double it in a single race.”

“If I loved the girl——”

“You may; who knows?” interrupted his friend. “Why not call and see her? hang about the house, and win her by the thousand little arts you are a master in. Or, would Nelly scratch your eyes out for only looking at her?”

“Nelly!”

“The gamekeeper's daughter. Take my advice, Martin, and drop that game. No good will

come of it; it may lose you a rich wife, and perhaps put a bullet in your brains. The old fellow looked as if he would rather have shot you than the rabbits."

"There is some truth in what you say, and I had almost made up my mind to have done with it, not from any fear of that old ruffian, but the wench hangs about the house, and I can hardly stir but she lays in wait for me. She is a pretty thing, and I ought to cry shame upon myself, perhaps, for taking advantage of a girl my mother spoiled and petted. However, there is time enough to think of that," said Blakeborough trying to shift the conversation, which his companion brought him back to, with an evident determination not to lose the advantage the present opportunity afforded him, as he replied—

"There is no time so good as the present! With a rich wife in prospect, you should turn the girl off at once, or else your more proper-minded young lady may fret at you, and wrinkle her brows in pretty anger at your sad doings."

"If the girl liked me, and I liked her, there might be a chance of what you say. For I feel a longing for an altered life—a reformation I don't know how to take the first step to, and yet I wish it taken. I feel, and feel even in the midst of my

wildest courses, a desire for a better name, a better reputation ! I would wish to shadow over the bad past by future good, and a more reputable condition."

"The very thing I mean ; and with a tender wife to help you in your virtuous resolution, who knows but you may after all reform, and die an honest man."

"All this might have been but for you, Upton ; all this, and more."

"Ay, ay, it might ; only there was greater excitement in the hunt you followed than in the every-day trot of honest life. A full-blooded young fellow, like you, must have time to sow his wild oats."

"They are sown, and grown, and the evil fruits I am now reaping. Step where I will, I find the bitter seeds have sprung to giant wrongs—they spread about me and upon me ! And yet, tempted as I was, what could I do ?"

"What, indeed ! But now you have reformed, —at least, you have promised—as a first step you'll throw Nelly off, and look after a rich wife in her stead. So let us be off at once."

Upton rose with a full determination of putting his friend's wavering intention to the push. He saw, with a clear-sighted cunning, the assurance

of future benefit to be derived from Blakeborough's bettered condition ; and once more asserting over him the powerful influence that, in former years, had enabled him to bend him to his will, he left his friend no time to pause, but holding before him the tempting prospect of relief from debts and from the daily harass by which he was surrounded, urged him on to put into immediate execution his half-digested resolve, by going to the Hall at once.

The appointment with Mr. Dormer formed a happy excuse, and Blakeborough, yielding to his friend's solicitation, left Chase House in company with Captain Nicholas Upton.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### HENGIST HALL.

THE room in which old Mr. Dormer sat formed an odd contrast to ordinary dwellings. With an eccentricity peculiar to himself, he hedged himself about with the old customs and the old manners of our ancestors, and in his house maintained a stiff formality, which he enforced on his domestics to their no small annoyance. This eccentricity—and some eccentricity is near allied to madness—made him the laughing-stock of his immediate neighbours, while his fame spread over the whole county as a gentleman of questionable sanity, but undoubted wealth.

His love of old customs and his admiration of by-gone times had always been a ruling passion, which he carried to so great an extent as to maintain, in face of all argument, the superior condition, social and moral, of the Elizabethan age to that of, in his eyes, the degenerate time in which he lived. As it was impossible to indulge his antiquated tastes in London—for there his friends



were daily scoffers—he resolved to settle in the country, where he could emulate the formal but roistering manners of three centuries back, and surround himself with the customs of the period he loved to read of. Here he could indulge in his Christmas gambols, his yule log, and March beer, to his heart's content, and make his household live as the old retainers lived in the days of Elizabeth and James.

A property being offered for sale in the wild part of Sussex, he became the purchaser on favourable terms, and here he thought he could live like our forefathers lived, freed from the trammels of modern times.

The old Hall, of which he was now the owner, afforded ample room for this, and, with a little alteration, he imagined he could convert the dwelling into a habitation adapted to the times he wished to reproduce for his peculiar gratification. The rooms were hung with tapestry, and he carried his eccentricity to so great an extent as to have the floors strewn with rushes, and set about with the oldest furniture he could purchase, while the country round was ransacked for some boasted cabinet or old-fashioned bedstead, to make Hengist Hall—he had had the old house rechristened after the first Saxon king—a picture of the ancient time.

Here he could sit and fancy he lived again with Burleigh and with Raleigh, and in his own person, at least, be a veritable specimen of the antique.

And so he sat within his room, and, like our ancestors, drank strong ale at breakfast. Tea, and such modern innovations, he abjured, as unworthy and effeminate, and one of the chief causes of the undersized population of later times. Strong ale and good beef, he said, gave bone and muscle to a man, and to their aids he traced the giant race who lived upon the land in days of yore, when Thor and Wodin grew mighty in their cups, and drank mead to fit them for the fight.

Unlike our ancestors, however, old Mr. Dormer was a late riser. Noon had come and gone before he rose from his bed of state, an undoubted antique that might have shadowed over the slumbers of Elizabeth herself, for the carved posts and oak canopy were black and worm-eaten, and he lay without a single yard of hangings about him, in that venerable piece of treasured furniture, dreaming of tournaments and courtly pastime.

He had risen at last and was now sitting over his breakfast, attended by a servant dressed in the oldest-fashioned dress he could muster, while he drank his ale from a tankard replenished from a veritable black jack, a present from the squire,

when negotiations were afoot for the sale of the Manor Farm.

He was not alone. His lawyer had arrived an hour before from London, who drank his ale and ate his beef with a sharp appetite, acquired by his ride from Godalming, where he had slept the night before.

“Have another slice of beef and another draught from the tankard!” urged Mr. Dormer, when he saw the lawyer slacken in his appetite. “Good March beer, and a rump of as fine an ox as ever nipt the grass, hurts no man. Not like your modern slops, that our ancestors would not have trusted near their lips. They knew better what put blood into a man, and gave him strength to wield a battle-axe or a two-handed sword.”

“Both well enough in their way,” rejoined the lawyer; “but a quill, now-a-days, is a more deadly weapon than any our ancestors ever wielded. It does more mischief with a single stroke than the greatest slash a two-handed sword ever made.”

“And what of that! Does it not prove our degeneracy, when a little hop-o'-my-thumb fellow like yourself—no offence, Pritchard—can do more with the wing of a goose than our forefathers could with a battle-axe? The good old times are past,

and lawyers now-a-days are greater men than the knights of old."

"They do more mischief, perhaps," replied Pritchard, with a quiet smile.

"Mischief! They'd consume an army with a sheet of parchment, and waste the substance of a line of kings in a single lawsuit. Armed with a pen full of ink they'll ride full tilt through a man's estate, and do more damage to his land than a charge of Crusaders did to the Infidels."

As they thus chatted over their meal, Martin Blakeborough and his friend, the Captain, walked up the avenue of the old house, and in due time made their appearance at the doorway of the house, where a porter sat in state in a hall set about with suits of armour and antique weapons, while a large deer hound gave the signal of their approach by a deep baying, that made the place echo with its sound.

The porter, who had been promoted from the plough tail to his present dignified post, looked sleek and rubicund, as though the good cheer and lazy comfort he enjoyed in his new capacity agreed with him, and he finished his morning's ale before he turned his blinking eyes on the new visitors, whose presence he announced by blowing on a horn—whether in imitation of our ancestors, or a

misapprehension on the part of Mr. Dormer, antiquarians must decide. No sooner had he sounded than the hound set up a dolorous bay, which the Captain turned into a yell, by slashing the poor brute with his riding whip till it slunk into a corner with a half growl, and showed its teeth at him when he passed in company with Blakeborough into the house. They passed through two or three passages and rooms, all furnished in the same antiquated fashion, into the presence of Mr. Dormer and his legal adviser.

The lawyer and his host rose as they entered the apartment, and after the usual exchange of salutations, the four gentlemen drew round the table, on which the beef and the tankard of ale still kept their place, while a fresh log was placed on the hearth, where it sputtered and hissed upon the glowing embers.

They talked upon various subjects, of horses, hounds, and that never-failing theme the weather ; old Mr. Dormer insisting that horses, hounds, and weather were all different, and all worse than they were three centuries ago ; while the lawyer, Pritchard, clearing a space on which to lay his papers, entered at once on what he called “ business.” The deed for the sale of the Manor Farm was there, and the necessary documents ready for

the conveyance of the land. These were placed upon the table, together with a bag of gold containing the required purchase-money, while the four sitters drew their chairs to affix their signatures and inspect the deed.

"You deliver this as your act and deed?" said the lawyer.

Blakeborough repeated after him those significant words, set his finger on the seal, and signed away a part of his birthright, and a portion of that old land which had been in his family more years than Mr. Dormer dared to think of. What would *he* not have given to have had as old a name, and have been master in the line direct of as fine an estate?

"I'd make my ancestors live again in such a house as yours, and reproduce in my own person all the virtue and the glory of the old Saxon time. There is nothing like it, squire,"—Mr. Dormer rose as he spoke to give full emphasis to his words; "nothing like old blood and old customs."

"And old wine," added the lawyer, who took a more practical view of things, adapting his own ideas of "old" to his more immediate self.

"A little fusion of new blood with old does good for all that," said Upton, breaking the slight

pause that followed. "I wonder you have never thought of that, Mr. Dormer, and sought out some family, old as the Conqueror, to marry your daughter into. Who knows but you might have a grandson fit to rival a paladin in his love of arms, and hand his grandfather's name down to admiring ages?"

"There is something in that, and could I light upon a veritable descendant of a true Saxon, or even a Norman, properly wedded and mated to a good old English stock, with no bar sinister to bring in question the true descent——"

"He is close at hand," interrupted Upton. "There's the squire here,—the finest specimen of an English gentleman I know of,—who has Saxon blood in every vein of his body."

"The squire!" cried old Dormer, opening his eyes with a half fearful, half admiring look at Blakeborough, who sat a willing instrument in the hands of his able negotiator. "No, no; he is too wild a bird to be caught by a silly girl like mine. Besides, the squire and I should never agree. He is fond of new notions, new servants, and new impossibilities, while my girl, Florence—I wish she had been christened Maud, but that was her mother's doing—is almost as fond of old times and old customs as I am, and must choose for herself."

“But the fathers of old——” urged Upton.

“Were just as good-natured as I am, only they have been maligned by modern writers, to suit their own purposes. And though I love old blood——”

“There is none better in the county,” again interrupted Upton, “than the squire’s, nor a man more willing, now he has sown his wild oats, to live a life of sober comfort, with a loving girl to make his home a blessing.

“That may be ; but the squire has so many loving girls one hardly knows which is which,” replied Mr. Dormer, with a half chuckle.

“That’s all over now, isn’t it, squire?” urged Upton to his friend, who nodded silently as the other continued, “All’s over and done with. A reformed rake, we all know, makes the best husband. Your two estates are but a hedgerow apart ; why not cut down the hedge, and make them join at once ?”

The Captain said this with such serious earnestness of manner, old Mr. Dormer fidgeted on his chair, while the lawyer Pritchard rustled his papers together, then placing the bag of money between them on the table, said—

“Let us settle one thing first, and come to the hedge afterwards. If all the land is to go on the same terms, Mr. Dormer will buy it



out and out, without a husband by way of make-weight."

"But the old blood, Pritchard. The old blood," urged Mr. Dormer.

"New guineas will buy the oldest and the best I know of. There is plenty to be had just now for ready money, so you can afford to wait, and choose your market."

Upton looked at Pritchard with a lowering brow, and then in a rather rude and boisterous tone replied—

"You hear what your lawyer says, Mr. Dormer. Only trust your money to his keeping, he'll choose a market for you, and swallow it up in sheepskins. I had rather invest my money in a Lincolnshire marsh than trust it in a lawyer's hands."

"You might *yours*," rejoined Pritchard, as he took a pinch of snuff, and quietly gathered up his papers.

Upton, for all his usual callousness and worldly-wise control over his feelings, was a little abashed by this retort of the lawyer. His face reddened, and he was about giving full vent to his irritation, when a harpsichord was heard in the next room, touched by a well-practised hand, while a soft, yet rich voice, sang to its accom-

paniment, and prevented the outbreak of temper in which the Captain was about to indulge.

“That’s my girl at her harpsichord again. I never can bring her to a love of old music and old instruments, although I bought her a virginal that had been touched by the fair fingers of Elizabeth herself—at least the dealer said so—and a book of four voice parts I could sit and listen to by the hour together, that is, if anybody could sing them. But it is of no use, there is no taste left for the old minstrelsy. Modern times have ruined everything.”

Yet still the soft voice came, and the well-touched instrument induced them to sit and listen to the sounds with no displeased attention. Blakeborough was the first to break the silence.

“Miss Dormer sings well,” he said, with a slight melancholy in his tone. “There is some comfort, after all, in a woman’s voice. A man’s bad passions melt before it, and he grows reflective at the sound.”

“To be sure he does,” rejoined Upton. But afraid to push the subject too far in the presence of the man of law, who was evidently opposed to the match-making, he shifted the conversation, and contented himself by saying—

“This is a comfortable house of yours, Mr.

Dormer, and old enough, in all conscience, I should think."

"It is well enough in its way, but with a little management I hope to make it look twice as old as it really is, and surround myself by all the time-honoured customs of our forefathers. I have rare Christmas gambols in store, and shall have an ox roasted for my retainers, whom I intend to feast in my hall, while we sit and look at their rare doings of song and dance. We shall have some mummers, too, and a man, dressed up as a bear, to toss and tumble in the midst, while the maids sing carols and catches. Such sports, and all old ones!" Mr. Dormer rubbed his hands, and seemed to glory in anticipation of his Christmas games.

"May I ask who owned the house before you?" inquired Upton of his excited host.

"A good sort of family enough, from what I hear, but they had a scapegrace son, who fell into bad ways, and bad company, and so the place was sold to pay his debts."

"Not an unusual consequence of fast-going young gentlemen and bad company," interposed the lawyer, raising his eyes, and looking over his spectacles in the direction of Upton.

"Well, thank Heaven, I have no son to ruin

me, though my girl would, if I'd let her, in buying clothes and food for all the poor of the neighbourhood. There is Dame Pullen's rent to be paid, or you will turn her out, squire, they say, and a hundred other matters she has taken in hand, she and the new curate between them."

"Oh! then the new curate and Miss Dormer arrange these little matters, do they? And often meet, I suppose, to consult how they are best to be done?" interrogated Upton, while he exchanged a quick glance with Blakeborough.

"Often?" repeated Mr. Dormer. "There is not a day passes but some message goes between them; about some old woman, who must have a bottle of my old wine to keep off the rheumatism; or a young couple starting life on a fat pig, and two rush-bottomed chairs of my providing. Far or near, ill or well, there is something to be done for everybody. Though, to do Mr. Stapleton justice, he looks after his flock with good old English feelings, and that's more than the heads of the county can say of themselves, at all events."

Upton and his friend exchanged glances again. At last Blakeborough said—

"This new curate, from what I have heard, is

popular with his parishioners. I have never seen him myself, I am always on horseback, and have never come across him in my rides."

"He would not suit you, squire," replied old Mr. Dormer, "he is a melancholy, civil-spoken young man, and would be quite out of place with your London companions. There is something about him, though, for all that, I do not quite understand; he seems to have some secret or other, that you never look in his pale face without wishing to find out, and I can't help thinking, my girl, with all a woman's curiosity, has taken a sneaking kindness to him from that very fact."

"A curate! you will never think of a poor curate as a match for your daughter. What would the old barons have said to such an inequality?" And Upton sneered as he asked the question.

"I don't know. They were kind-hearted men at the bottom, only a little rough. A curate is a gentleman, after all, and Mr. Stapleton, from what I hear, has gentle blood in his veins, though not so old, perhaps, as I could wish. But, as I said before, all this is very well in its way; sick people must be visited, and old custom demands that I should look after the wants of the poor. But before long I intend to alter things; I mean

to have them relieved in my own hall, from a table covered daily with beef and ale, ready for all comers, and whilst my almoner relieves their wants, my servants shall wait upon them, and do the honours of the house, as the retainers of the old barons did in days of yore."

"All very kind, and all very good," interposed the lawyer, "but very expensive; and my experience tells me the more you give the more you may. You may take it for granted, men wont work for their daily bread so long as they can get it for nothing."

"Our ancestors did it, and I should like to know where you will meet a finer or more industrious peasantry than lived three centuries ago? They fed well, slept well, fought well, and served their masters with a strong right hand. You have not read, Pritchard; you know nothing of old times, except old law, and that, for aught I know, may be better than new."

Once mounted on his hobby, Mr. Dormer would ride it to the death, and not slacken rein, before all the array of arguments that could be brought against him. They rather stimulated him in his antiquarian pursuits, urging him on to indulge his eccentricity on a more enlarged scale.

At this moment, as if by a preconcerted signal, Florence entered the apartment. At the sight of strangers in the room, she stood doubtful whether to advance or retire, when the porter announced the curate.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE MEETING.

THE same hesitation that had induced Florence to pause at the sight of her father's visitors, appeared to come over the curate, as he stood with one foot advanced into the room, and the other drawn back, as if in the act of retiring, when a good-natured gesture from Mr. Dormer put an end to his indecision. The curate walked towards the table, round which the old gentleman and his friends still sat; while the former, rising from his chair, held out his hand, and introduced Mr. Stapleton to Martin Blakeborough and his friend the Captain.

The curate's pale face flushed with a sudden crimson, whilst Blakeborough, rising from his chair, grasped its back with one hand, and stared at him with doubting eyes, his cheeks as pale as ashes. A deadly pallor spread itself over the swarthy brow of Upton, who sat deprived of motion, with all his senses gathered to his eyes, looking on the curate as on an apparition; while old Mr. Dormer and the lawyer leant back



in their chairs, and gazed in mute astonishment at one another, confounded by the strange scene before them.

That a sudden and displeasing recognition had taken place between the curate and Mr. Dormer's visitors there could be no doubt, and their host was evidently puzzled how to proceed; while the lawyer, with a cold, yet searching eye, glanced from face to face in hopes of gathering from their different expressions arguments to build his thoughts upon, and sift the case of each. Looking with a keen, earnest gaze, his eyes fixed at last on Upton, and never turned from his countenance during the brief conversation that followed.

"Introduction is unnecessary, it appears. You seem to know each other well enough already," said Mr. Dormer, breaking the awkward pause. "I had no idea, Mr. Stapleton, you and the squire were old friends, or that the Captain was an old acquaintance too."

"We have met before," replied the curate, speaking slowly but calmly, his eyes still glancing at Blakeborough and his companion.

"And yet the squire said just now——"

"Ay, but we have changed since we last met," interrupted the curate. "We knew each other then by different names. I had no idea

the Mr. Martin I formerly knew and Squire Blakeborough were the same persons, any more than he had that a certain Mr. Stapleton—the name is common enough—was now a country curate. Whether the other person has changed *his* name I do not know, although perhaps it may have been necessary.”

“A case of *alibi*,” half muttered the lawyer to himself, yet loud enough to be heard by all the parties interested.

Blakeborough seemed to force the words from him as he replied, “We—we have met before;” then sank with a dejected, although dogged air, into his seat.

“Not on very good terms I should think,” exclaimed Mr. Dormer; “you could not look more blank if you had unhorsed one another at a tournament.”

“I have a few words to communicate to Miss Dormer; have I your permission?”

The curate waited until Mr. Dormer nodded his approval, when, with a slight bow to Mr. Pritchard, and a half threatening glance towards Blakeborough and his friend, he moved to where Florence was standing, a surprised spectator of the scene, and left the apartment in her company.

A feeling of uneasiness came over the four sitters at the abrupt departure of the curate. Mr. Dormer twisted about upon his chair, while the lawyer, without moving his eyes from the Captain's face, appeared to be taking mental notes of what was going on. Willing to put an end to the constrained silence, Blakeborough stammered an excuse for leaving so early, and was on the point of quitting the room, when Mr. Dormer arrested his footsteps by saying—

“Have you forgotten your money, squire, or do you wish me to take charge of it till some other time?”

Blakeborough reddened with confusion as he returned to the table, and taking the bag of money from the lawyer's hand, bowed him and Mr. Dormer a formal adieu, then left the room in company with his friend the Captain.

They walked with hurried footsteps through the passages leading to the doorway of the house, anxious to pass into the air. But as they were leaving the hall, the deer-hound darted with a sudden spring at Upton, who struck him down with a heavy blow upon his chest, while the hound growled and barked with savage fury after them, as he and Blakeborough walked down the avenue leading from the house.

They were no sooner out of hearing than Upton, to whose face the colour had not yet returned, said—

“Who’d have thought of *his* turning up, and at a time like this?”

“Curse him!” cried Blakeborough, with rising passion; “and curse on my hand that did not put it out of his power to come and cross me here. I was in a fair way of redeeming my name and fortune, when he comes, like an avenging spirit, to drive me back upon myself. Oh! that I had the chance to come again; he should not get off so easily a second time.”

“And he to be your rival, after all! A prim parson, with his oily tongue, who will lay bare your past life, expose you to the girl and the whole neighbourhood for a cheat and a forger.”

“Upton!”

“It is of no use mincing matters now. He’ll call you cheat and forger, and how will you help yourself? What proof have you to the contrary, when he sees you in company with the very man the scouts were set upon for that little affair two years ago. Of all men the earth holds, to think that he should come and thwart us here, at the very moment everything was ripe, and the girl could have been had after a month’s courtship.

The case is clear enough, and the next thing to do is, how to help yourself !”

“Leave me to manage that,” replied Blakeborough, knitting his brows, and walking with hasty strides ; “if I catch him opening his lips about me or mine, I’ll challenge him—and——”

“And make sure of him this time. But a parson, you know, can’t fight ; he’ll send you a sermon in reply to your challenge, or refer you to the bishop of the diocese as his second.”

“I’ll find a way, never you fear. My blood is up, and I’ll hunt him out of the county, if it cost me every inch of land I stand upon. What ! shall a petty curate, with his sixty pounds a year, contend with a Blakeborough in his own county, where he and<sup>s</sup> his have owned the land for miles about, these hundreds of years ? Oh, for an hour of the times old Dormer talked of. I’d lay him by the heels, and clap him within four walls, keep him on bread and water till he whined like a beaten dog ! Chain him up, fetter, and gag him !”

“All very well, if you had the power, but you haven’t, more’s the pity, or I should rather like to be his jailer myself. Those times are over, and your dungeon out of date.”

“Just as my game was scented, and I was

ready to bring it down, to think this young whelp should startle it, and make it shy of me!"

"Can't you bring *him* down instead?" suggested Upton.

"How?"

"Oh! we must think of a way," replied the other. "But with all the noble charity that belongs to his cloth, he may find it worth his while to hold his tongue, lest in making known your doings he bring disgrace upon himself as a ruined gamester, who has taken to holy orders in hopes of retrieving his character. He is not so great a fool as to talk of what must of necessity bring discredit upon himself, so there's time enough to think, before you take any resolution of a dangerous kind. When I am gone—and I have promised to hold you harmless for one half of what you carry—you will have time enough to shift your sail according to circumstances, or pass off Nelly on him, or entangle him in some amour or other that shall undo his credit. There are fifty ways, all good ones, if you will only hold your temper in, and bide your time."

But Blakeborough could not bide his time. With passions easily roused, he could never wait and calculate as Upton could have done. All that he did was done from impulse; and the

undue licence he had always given to his temper urged him on to an immediate and unwise course, which his more wily companion had been the first to take advantage of, and involve him in the consequences of his intemperate haste. After a little reflection his hasty passion would subside, and his better feelings coming into play, he would be the first to condemn what he had before resolved upon. Upton knew this well enough, and determined to take advantage of his friend's present temper, by securing to himself the advantage he was aiming at.

“If you must have the money, you must,” said Blakeborough, emptying the contents of the bag into his handkerchief spread out on a low bank, then, dividing it with his hand, told Upton to choose. He did—the largest, as it appeared to him, and shook Blakeborough by the hand, after he had pocketed the money, with a well-satisfied air.

“So far so well, and you are safe, Martin, for ever from me. To-night I start for London, if my brute of a horse can carry me, and so over to France; it may be dangerous staying here, now *he* has turned up. I'll write you word where you may find me, and leave me alone to spread a net for our pigeoned friend the parson.”

"Again and again curse him, I say!" cried Blakeborough, "he had better not cross my way, for I am in no humour to stand it, since but for him, I should not have to part with this money, or buy your silence. As for him personally, I defy him and all that he can do, and will find a way to make him keep his tongue within his teeth, never fear. And yet, I'd gladly give the other half, to have him a thousand miles away."

"It would be as well perhaps ; certainly more safe, and then you might have the girl all to yourself."

At this moment, and as they turned an angle in the road, Nelly Coombs darted across their path, and stood fronting Blakeborough with heaving breast, and starting eyes, from which the tears had been hastily dashed away. They now opened on him with a vengeful stare, as she stood trembling with passion face to face with her betrayer.

Blakeborough started when he saw her, and smarting under his recent annoyance, said sharply and sternly—

"What do you want here?"

"What do you want *there*?" cried Nelly, pointing with her out-stretched arm in the direction of the Hall. "What do you want *there*?" repeated



the girl, with impassioned voice and glistening eyes. “*Her*, I suppose—you want her, now you have done with me, but I’ll not bear it, I won’t!” And the girl, swelling with jealous fury, stamped her foot upon the ground, and stood erect before the squire, who almost cowed before her, as he replied, in soothing tones—

“You are a foolish girl, Nelly, and don’t know what you are talking about. Go home, and hold your tongue.”

“I won’t—I’ll talk till I scream again! Do you think I did not see you? And what did you want at the Hall, if it wasn’t to see her? You could not come last night because of her; and I am to be pointed at by everybody, as the squire’s cast-off girl, I suppose, because of her! But mind what you are about, Martin, I’ll not be cast off for nothing!”

Blakeborough lost what little patience he possessed, now he found his victim ready to turn upon him; and thinking to frighten her from her purpose by a loud voice, he said passionately—

“Home with you, I say! Are all the beggars in the parish to dog my steps, and lay in wait for me? I have had enough of your airs already, and if I catch you at your tricks again, or

plaguing me with your nonsense, I'll have you turned off the estate, and sent to jail !”

“Do ! send me to jail ! What do I care for a prison, now you have made me what I am, and taken up with your fine Miss ? I was ‘pretty Nelly’ once, ‘dear Nelly,’ and ‘bright eyes,’ and now I may go to prison !” As the old time came back with the words she uttered, she dashed her hand across her eyes, and wept as though her heart would break.

A little softened by the girl's sufferings, Blakeborough replied—

“This is nonsense, Nelly ! There, there—go home, be a good girl, and don't make scenes before my friend. Good-bye !” saying which the squire and his companion walked on, and left her sobbing and wringing her little hands by the roadside.

“This must have an end, and at once,” cried Blakeborough. “You have a cooler head than I have, Nic ; you must see this girl for me, and make her understand it is all over between us. But then her father——”

“What the old gamekeeper, Dick Coombs ? Oh ! never mind him—he'll not trouble you, if you leave the girl alone. That's what he wants,” urged Upton.

“I’ll promise him that, at all events ; while she’s in this temper she’ll ruin everything, so the sooner it is settled the better. We can’t go on in this way for ever !”

“Or your chance is lost up at the Hall. Not that the girl is likely to love you the worse for a little wildness, provided you drop it at once, and let her see how anxious you are to reform, for her sake. These little things will happen, though the sooner it is ended now the better.”

They walked on in silence for some time, in the direction opposite to Chase House. They were both strong men, and good walkers, and fevered by their over-night’s indulgence, paced along, as though the exercise were agreeable, chatting at intervals of their meeting with their former dupe, in the person of the new curate, whom Upton two years before had hunted up in London, as a young man just returned from college, and easily to be tempted. In company with Mr. Martin—the name Blakeborough was known by during his wild courses—they led him on to gamble, and stripped him of his means. Finding him an easy, unsuspecting prey, and that more money could be obtained from his indulgent parents, Upton induced him to larger ventures, in hopes of redeeming his past losses, and by means of false

dice—unknown to Blakeborough at the time—pigeoned and fleeced him of all he possessed. Desperate in his ruin, and wild with drink, he quarrelled with Upton and his friend Mr. Martin ; swords were drawn, and in the midnight riot that ensued, the watch came in, when Upton, being taxed with the cheat, was searched, and the false dice found upon him. A duel followed, in which Blakeborough was prevailed upon to take the part of principal—for high words had passed with him as well—when the young collegian fell severely if not dangerously wounded. In the course of their nightly meetings, bills had been drawn by the Captain, and accepted by his dupe, for losses at cards and dice, and Upton had taken the opportunity of adding to their number, by forging his signature to several others. Suffering from his recent wound, oppressed with shame and degradation, the young man's mind gave way, and for some months he lay incapable of thought or motion. The bills meanwhile fell due, when his parents, thinking to preserve their son from prison, sold their estate to pay his debts, and the fraud remained undetected, until the restoration of Philip Stapleton to health, but too late to save his parents from the ruin under which they sank.

No sooner was the cheat found out, than

Upton, through whose hands the bills had passed, disappeared from the pursuit of justice, while Mr. Martin—although a suspected accomplice in the fraud, but against whom nothing could be proved—retired into the country to take possession of his estate, on the death of his father, old Martin Blakeborough.

Since that date the three men had pursued their different ways in life, the Captain living abroad, or visiting London by stealth. Pressed for money, he had at last sought out his old companion, when, by strange accident they encountered their former dupe, in the person of the new curate, at the house of old Mr. Dormer.

During the course of their walk it had been settled between them, that the Captain should delay his return to London until the morning; in the meantime he was to see Nelly, and acquaint her with the squire's determination. To prevent the possibility of his changing his mind, Upton had prevailed on Blakeborough to accompany him to town to look after his business affairs, and make arrangements to meet the pressing demands of old Isaacs and his lawyer, Clam. These matters settled, he would be in a better position to pursue his designs upon Miss Dormer, and perhaps retrieve his fortunes by a lucky stroke at hazard

—at all events, go he must ; and the two friends agreed to start early on the following morning for London.

They had reached the churchyard at Lurgashall, and before them stood the village church. The porch door was open, and the old sexton was busy over a new-made grave dug in the green sward of the churchyard, which was dotted here and there with mounds of earth, neatly turfed and twisted over with thongs of hazel ; and still the sexton dug, and with his old withered arms shovelled out the earth, to form a resting-place for some departed dweller in the parish, whose remains would lie and rot within the quiet of that peaceful vale. Here, at last, he would find a rest from toil ; and the remains of poor humanity would crumble in the dust unto which it had returned, while the bright spirit of the sleeping clay, mounting aloft upon the wings of hope, sought the Hereafter bliss ! That promised bourne, the heritage of all, of the poor peasant, as of the crowned king,

“ And in the dust be equal made,  
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.”

Intent upon his task, the sexton dug, nor turned his eyes from the moist earth he shovelled

out, while the squire and his friend stopped at the churchyard paling, and leant upon it, looking at the old worn man half sunk within a pit he would soon have to fill himself. And yet he seemed as merry in his task, as though old gravediggers could never die, nor think upon the near approach of that mortality which comes to all.

The eyes of Blakeborough bent with a mournful gaze through the opened doorway of the old church, while the Captain leant his back against the rail, and, with a careless air, whistled as he rested, or struck a stray pebble with his foot.

Not so Blakeborough. His deep-set, earnest eye, still looked into the space beyond the opened door, and as the sombre light glimpsed through the stained and painted windows, the aisle was dimly lighted, and there beyond, on either side the chancel, were ranged his kindred's tombs.

Pushing back the swinging gate of the rustic paling, his eyes still bent before him, he paced slowly on to the gravelled path, and walked gloomily and silently up to the old porchway. Impressed with the still calm of that silent church, he looked within, then removing his hat moved into the sacred pile, and so passed on to where his mother's tomb was placed.

Silently he read the inscription written on it,

and with a melancholy and softened aspect gazed upon the stone, as though recalling there the gentle face that had watched him in his childhood, and ever looked with love and tenderness upon that failing son. The peaceful teaching of the hoping past came over him as he looked, and with dim eyes read, again and again, that mother's name, and bent his head in silent sorrow.

Subdued at last by the recollection of that holy love, the strong man melted into tears, and sank upon his knees in silent prayer, beside his mother's tomb.

He prayed ! and prayed with humbled spirit, as he begged a blessing on that mother lost, yet saved, he hoped, and winging with the angels round the Almighty's throne. So might she mediate for him, and through the light of her own virtues shine on him, and bless him as he knelt !

In the midst of that deep utterance an almost noiseless motion made him turn, and there beside him stood his tempter and his friend—Nic. Upton.



## CHAPTER X.

### THE FLIGHT.

THE sun had scarcely set, when Captain Nicholas Upton sought the gamekeeper's cottage in the Quell, and with cold, heartless words acquainted Nelly that her dream was over, and that all the past must be forgotten. Her lover had abandoned her, and she must give up all thoughts of seeing him again.

The poor girl's sufferings, her sobs and cries, were lost on him. He had other views for his dear friend ; and this young girl's peace he no more regarded than he would a piece of rock, or wall, that lay between him and the object he wished to gain ; he only knew it must be cut through, and he cared little by what means. His cold and utter selfishness looked on her with a chilling indifference, except, perhaps, when his eye surveyed her rounded beauty and her girlish charms.

He had fulfilled his message to the letter, by informing her that the squire had given her up, and that all was over between him and her.

“Over!” shrieked Nelly; “yes, as far as he cares or knows. What does he care for that which is yet to come to me, or of the shame I must bring on those who own me? Oh, Martin! Martin! and oh, father! father! who is to hide me, who is to protect and shelter me in my need?”

“Oh! you’ll find plenty if you’ll only keep a good heart, and not spoil your pretty face by crying. Why, a bright-eyed girl like you will have plenty of lovers, clodhoppers by the dozen, to take you off the squire’s hands; and he has sent you ten guineas by way of helping you to a husband, who, like a good-natured fellow, will protect you from the consequences of your past love-making. There’s Jim the hedger, whom I told you of before—he’ll take you, and thank you too; and with ten guineas in your hand, you’ll be a prize the country round will jump at.”

“Me! what, me? a poor cast-off of the squire’s! They’d hunt me out of the parish, unless my father kills me first for what I have done. There’s not a labourer on the estate would not make a mouth at me, and their daughters turn away from me; and can I stay here to bring still greater shame on that old head, which has grown white already with only guessing at it? What will he say, some months to come, when

he shall know the worst, and what I really am?"

Here Nelly sunk her head within her hands, and rocked herself to and fro in an agony of grief.

"What could a girl like you expect, when you went sweethearting with one so much above you? If all squires' wenches were to take on in this way, there would be a pretty time of it. So come, be a good girl, and you may perhaps find a friend, after all."

The Captain laid his hand upon her shoulder as he spoke, and tried to kiss her; but Nelly started from his side, and doubling her fists in his face, cried—

"Out with you, out of the cottage; for, poor as it is, it is too good for you! I have heard of you before to-day—you are his friend, Nic Upton, and a worse one he couldn't find. You have led him on to all; so out with you, or I'll scream at the door and bring the neighbours on you. It's all your doings! yours! you have set him on to this, and made him turn me off; so out, and go at once, or I'll do you a mischief."

Saying which, Nelly seized a half-consumed brand off the blazing fire, and looked as if she would be as good as her word.

"You won't let me have a kiss? Well, it

can't be helped; there's a better chance for the hedger than I thought. He'll have a virtuous wife, after all, and one who never gives her kisses away, although a little hasty in her temper now and then."

Nelly heard the cruel scoff, and looked a second Nemesis as she stood with flashing eyes and glowing cheeks. Another moment, and the brand was hurled at Upton, who bent aside and let the log hiss past him through the open door into the garden.

With a slow, swaggering gait he walked away, then turning, kissed his hand to her. But Nelly did not see it. Overwhelmed by this new grief, and smarting under Upton's cruel taunt, she had fallen upon the ground, and now lay sobbing and moaning on the cottage floor.

Upton, for all his swagger, was abashed; and once out of sight, stood for a moment, and looked as though he felt the coward's part he had played—balked, too, by a girl whom the squire had won by gentler means, perhaps treacherous ones. "I am a fool, after all," he thought, "and ought to have known better. But of all the wild young gipsies I ever came across, this is the worst, and Martin must look out for storms, or she'll play him some jade's trick or other when he least expects

t. Most girls, now, would have taken a kiss kindly, and put up with a new lover as soon as the old one was turned off, but this wench has Dick Coombs's blood in her veins, and would shoot a man as soon as look at him; so she's well got rid of."

He walked along again; and, as his custom was when baffled or opposed, slashed with his stick at anything within its reach.

For a time Nelly lay on the floor, then drawing herself up upon her knees, looked long and gloomily into the fire. She neither spoke nor moved, but still looked on, and saw the embers whiten on the hearth, and never turned her eyes aside. Sinking her head upon her chest, and sitting with her legs bent under her, she placed one hand upon her heart, and with the other held her head, and sat staring into the fire.

Evening had fallen upon her as she thus sat, yet still the embers glowed and the red light fell on her bent-up form as it crouched and huddled on the hearth, while the night without grew darker and darker, as the fire burnt itself to a clear heat, and lit the whitewalls of the cottage with a crimson glare. A heavy tread on the garden path made her start up as the open doorway was shadowed by a man's form, and her father walked into the

room. He laid his gun upon the table, then sank upon a seat, without even looking at her.

He sat musing for a while, one arm leaning heavily on the table, with a listless and dejected air. Rousing himself at length from out his trance, he looked about as if in search of Nelly. He had not far to look; his poor child had crawled before him, and now sank her head upon her father's knees.

As the gamekeeper looked upon that crouching form, his features twitched with mental agony and his eyes grew dim. Placing his hand upon her bent down head, he bowed his own over his erring child, and sat subdued and motionless.

And so they remained without a word, though the quick and stifled sobbing of that repentant girl came thick and fast, while blinding tears fell from the old man's eyes upon her bent down head. And as they sat, the fading embers drew in their light, and the place looked shadowy and full of forms.

At last Dick spoke, his voice sounding with a hoarse and but half audible murmur over the stillness of the room, as he said—

“Look to the fire, Nell; it wants a fresh log.”

Nelly rose with an abstracted air, and set about rekindling what she had seen before grow

dim without even an effort to restore. She fetched the old man's bread and cheese, put a mug of ale upon the table, then sat upon a low stool at his feet, and watched him as he ate his supper.

But Dick had lost his appetite. He ate little, and that little he swallowed with difficulty. The big ball rose in his throat and choked him when he tried to gulp his food, so he wrapped the remainder of his meal in his handkerchief, and put it in his pocket.

"I must have my sleep, girl, and then go out and watch the—the master's land. There are bad fellows about, and last night a gang of 'em were poaching in the Three Acre Field, but this time I hope to catch 'em in the thick on't."

"You must not go out then, father," cried Nelly, as the recollection of the men she had seen pass by the previous night flashed through her mind; "Ned Pullen will kill you."

"Well, what if he does? The old man's not wanted now, there'll be no one to miss or care for him when he is gone."

"Father!"

Nelly could say no more; she felt all that her father would have said, and only wept the more.

"Dont'e cry, wench, that'll do no good. Time was you cried for your mother, and what

she taught you, and the old lady up at the house, too, but you forgot it, for all that, and them as well. It is too late to cry now."

But whether too late or not, Nelly still cried, and cried the more because her father told her not.

"'Twill do no good, Nell; it is only by praying for the wrong you have done you can do good, so dry your eyes, and leave your poor father to cry for you."

"Oh, father! if you only knew what was at my heart," gasped Nelly, stretching her hands across the table, and seizing one of his large rough hands in both of hers, "you would not tell me not to cry. If you only knew the reason I have for tears, and more now than ever, when I look at you and see you sitting there. Suppose the time should come when I may cry and shriek to see you, and yet not see you as I see you now?"

"What do you mean, girl?"

"I mean that, should you ever come to lose me, or I to lose you, no one will see me cry then, or care about it if I do. You will not see me cry, and yet I may be crying night and day, and not see you either."

"Not see me, Nell?"

"No, father, not see you. Suppose I were away—long dreary miles away—and you sitting



here all by yourself in the old cottage, thinking of the wrong I had done you—of all the shame and wretchedness I had brought upon you ; would you not wish to see me once again, if only to see me cry again ?”

The old man groaned as the girl said this, and a shiver ran through his frame when his child talked of her shame ; but he only groaned—he did not speak.

“ Would you not call me back as once I was—not as I am—call back my pretty innocent face, as you have said it was, to look upon you once again, to hold your hand again, and kneel before you as I do now, begging your blessing and forgiveness ?”

Still holding by her father’s hand, and sliding from her seat, Nelly fell on her knees before him, and with clasped, trembling hands begged the blessing and forgiveness she so much needed.

“ It’s not in human natur’ for a man to curse his child, but what good can my blessing do you when you have lost the blessing of your Maker ! turned from the ways you were told to walk in, at church on Sundays, and laid aside, for a lying tongue, the Book that never lies ? Look overhead and pray for pardon and forgiveness there !”

With his finger pointing as though he could

have shown the skies through the dark ceiling of his cot, the old man rose from his chair, and offered up a prayer for her who knelt, then sank down again groaning, between deep, convulsive sobs, and buried his gray head within his hands.

Nelly prayed as well, and with streaming eyes and faltering tongue begged a blessing and forgiveness, not only for herself, but called a blessing down upon that poor old man her shame had stricken, and laid thus prostrate before his erring child.

By degrees the gamekeeper grew calmer, as though his silent prayer had soothed him in his grief. Rousing himself at last, he lifted Nelly from her knees, kissed her, and said, "Heaven bless you, Nell, and forgive you all your faults, as I do."

The girl flung her arms about him as he uttered the words of comfort. She seemed to hold him for the last time within their close embrace, kissing him with a passionate emotion, as she held him in her arms with twice their natural strength, and pressed him to her.

"There, Nell, now go to bed, and pray again before you sleep. I must lie down a bit, and then out on my rounds. It's a bright night, and I and my mates must go over the land, for

Master Ned and the rest of them are at no good."

Worn and exhausted by her recent trials, Nelly went into the inner chamber to her rest. But before she went she cast a long and earnest look upon her father, who threw himself upon a bench before the fire, and slept in peace.

Dick slept; his deep-drawn breath and easy respirations told how quiet were his slumbers, as he dreamt perhaps of Nelly's childhood, and of the pretty face that once more looked into his own with bright and innocent eyes, or clambered up his knee to sit and crow there as on a throne of state.

For two good hours Dick slept, unconscious of the aching time he lived through; then, from old habit, waking at his accustomed time, he shook off his drowsiness, and sat upright upon the bench. He piled the fire up with turf, closed the cottage door, then went, gun in hand, upon his nightly rounds.

And Nelly, where was she? Awake; or did she sleep and dream as he did?

Within the quiet of her darkened room the poor girl stood; then falling on her knees beside her pallet, prayed long and earnestly. She had a weight of grief upon her mind, and her heart beat fast and painfully when she thought of all

the shame and misery she must endure before the end should come of that bad beginning she had yielded to, when she first listened to the sinful suit of Martin Blakeborough. Contrition now had come upon her, and she would have given up her life, given it with joy, so she could have recalled the past, in which she had forfeited her honest name, and with it all the hoping peace of her young life. She knelt and prayed, and as she thought of what her father had said, and of the blessing he had called upon her—on her who had made his name a bye-word—the hot tears welled up, and streaming from their hidden fount, poured down her cheeks, and wetted the small palms of the little hands she pressed upon them.

With her face resting upon her humble bed, but still upon her knees, the poor girl slept. And when she awoke she was chilled with cold, an aching cramp had seized her limbs, so that she could hardly move. She crept at last upon her bed, and lay there fretting like a sick child left to itself.

She heard her father stirring, and rising from her bed, watched him go out—watched him with greedy eyes, as though they looked their last of that old man she had loved from

child to girlhood, and who had watched and loved her as a father only watches over the child he loves.

Dick Coombs shouldered his gun, and went upon his way. But Nelly's, where was hers?

She watched him through the gloom, and with a deep-drawn sigh closed the door; then pulling the table nearer to the fire, sat within its warmth in silent thought. Her resolution seemed to come with it; and taking from a box some sheets of paper, and a pen and ink, she sat herself down and wrote.

Had she ever written at that table before? written by stealth to her secret lover; who can tell? Or sent some urchin messenger to inform Martin when and where to meet her? Those meetings were over now; yet she wrote to him, wrote how she despised and hated him, and yet forgave him for the love she bore him once. She could write and spell with ease; the old squire's lady had instructed her in both, and in other duties she had forgotten now. But the son had undermined the mother's teaching, and made a wreck of what she had taken such pains to nurture. Her wise instruction was forgotten, or for a time at least was cast aside; but still that pretty pupil remembered how to read and write,

and she wrote now bitter and tender words by turns, said how she had loved him, and how he had deserted and neglected her. She folded up the letter she had written with such ease, for the words came from her heart, and she had no need to study what to write, her ready feelings prompted her, then placed it in her bosom until the time should come when she could send it to him.

But there was yet a task to do, and that she trembled at!

How could she write to *him*! how address her father for the last time, and say "good bye" to all his love and care? And yet it must be done. She knew it must, and she sat by the light of the small candle she was writing by, and pondered what to say. "Dear Father;" but there her trembling hand had paused, for the words appeared to spread themselves over the paper; and "Dear Father" was all she saw, until her eyes filled up with tears, and shut both letters and paper from her sight.

"Dear Father,—When this letter comes to you I shall be miles away, where no one can find me." She paused again. Could she leave him to his misery—leave him, that poor and slighted man, without an eye to cheer or voice to comfort

him? Leave him to solitary thinking, to sickness, and she not there to nurse and wait upon him? Leave him perhaps to die, and meet his silent, solitary death without her hand to close his eyes or aid his dying prayer! Could she go “miles away,” and leave him to his shut-up desolate home?

Yet she must do it. She felt she dared not stay, to bring still further grief upon him. He would at least be ignorant of what was yet to come, and she wished to spare him the shame, the misery that must fall on her. She could not hide her guilt much longer, and could she make him suffer by her degradation? No! she would carry her child—if she should live to bear it—carry it from door to door, and beg for food and shelter, or die of want—anything rather than let that old man participate in her shame. For all the wealth that lay beneath the sun she felt she could not do it, and so she wrote again. “Dear Father—When this letter comes to you I shall be miles away, where no one can find me.” And as she wrote the night wind blew, and the cold air swept over the bleak downs, and the moon and stars came out as if to light her on her way.

She finished the letter, wetted as it was with tears, and stained and blotted with a thousand

kisses, and left it on the table over which they had just been sitting, and on the spot where she had held his hand in hers. She knelt again upon the place where she had knelt before, and prayed again, as if to beg from the very air he had stood in another blessing on her head ; then laying down the money Upton had brought her, on the table—all but a guinea which she kept to help her on her way—gathered together a few scanty things ; and stealing softly to the door, as though, poor girl, her father could have heard her silent tread, passed with trembling steps away ; then looking back, saw the cottage where she had played and gambolled in her happy childhood, standing under the dark hill, behind which the moon was rising, and with fearful steps ran swiftly up it, pressing her little hand upon her aching heart.

She climbed the hill at last, that steep and frowning hill down which his horse had come ; and resting on the top, her airy form looked like a fairy vision as the moon shone out and fell upon it. Then it melted like a mist away, and the sharp edge of the steep hill, unbroken by a speck, shone like a rim of silver set on the edge of the black and swelling down.



## CHAPTER XI.

### THE LETTER.

IN earnest conversation at the end of lanes, or gathered in small groups outside the ale-house, the early stirrers in the village gossiped as they stood, busy with the events of the over-night, and of the affray that had taken place between Ned Pullen's gang and the squire's gamekeepers, who had come upon them unawares in the midst of their depredations ; and, after a hand-to-hand fight of it, had forced them to decamp, but not until serious injury had been inflicted on both parties. For the poachers fought long and desperately, and Dick Coombs, it was reported, had been badly hurt—struck on the head by the butt end of Ned Pullen's gun.

The news ran like a train of gunpowder, as from mouth to mouth the tidings went, of how Pullen and his companions had been compelled to take to their heels, and were now out of the way at hide and seek ; while Dick Coombs, who had been left for dead upon the ground, had with

some difficulty been recovered by his brother keepers, who were almost as badly hurt themselves in the desperate struggle they had had the over-night. Dick Coombs and Ned Pullen had met face to face, but the old man was no match for his brutal antagonist, who, after some severe blows given and taken, struck the old man down. Thinking he had killed him, he had at last drawn his companions off, leaving their nets and snares upon the ground.

From the gossiping of the villagers, the news soon spread to other ears; and Mr. Dormer's household was startled by the sad news of the overnight's fray. Florence was the first to hear of what had taken place, when her quick impulse prompted her to go up to the Quell, inquire after Dick Coombs's hurt, and gather from himself the truth of what she had heard, distorted as it was by fresh additions from the last new comer. But, recollecting the tales she had heard of his daughter Nelly, and the association of her name with the squire's, she resolved to wait until the curate paid his morning visit, when they could think over the wisest course to take, and consult her father what she ought to do.

Old Mr. Dormer submitted with a shrug, and full of her good errand, Florence and Mr. Staple.

ton lost no time in walking to the Quell, in hopes of relieving Dick Coombs in his distress. But the old man was not in his cottage, nor was his daughter Nelly. The door was thrown wide open, but neither father nor daughter could be found, although the curate searched for them in and about the cottage, but could see nothing of them.

Failing in their present errand, they walked away towards Dame Pullen's. The squire's bailiff had refused to wait, and on that day she would be distrained upon for arrears of rent; her goods would be seized, and the poor woman, turned out of her cottage, would have to begin the world again, or go into the poor-house.

It was no fault of hers that her husband led the life he did. She had worked early and late to keep her little household together, and tried her best to wean him from his desperate courses, but to little purpose; for although in early life Ned Pullen had been a pattern of an honest yeoman, the first in village games, the most active in village sports, and the best wrestler in all the county, his love of drink had drawn him by slow degrees from his home and the honest life he once had led, until he had become the ale-house sot, and the terror of the neighbourhood, for when

half drunk he would fight and quarrel with the first who came, and his neglected wife was always forced to bear her share of his savage and unguarded temper.

Thinking of all that had taken place, and of the object they had in view, Florence and Mr. Stapleton walked along, talking over the events of the past night, and of the absence of Dick Coombs from his cottage. There were other matters, too, busy in the mind of Florence. There was the strange meeting yet to be accounted for, which had taken place between her present companion with the squire and his friend. She had seen that meeting with wonder, and, without being able to explain it to herself, had done nothing else but think of it. The more she thought, the more she became perplexed. She felt there was something left untold, some mystery the threads of which she could not unravel, and although curious to learn the strange relationship evidently existing between Mr. Stapleton and Martin Blakeborough, her delicacy held her curiosity in check, which, as a matter of course, only became the more excited the more she tried to keep it in subjection.

The distance was soon passed over that lay between the Hall and Pullen's cottage; but with

all her little art, Florence could obtain no clue by which to guide her guessing thoughts, or lead her on to form a notion as to when, or how, Blakeborough and the pale-faced companion of her walk had been connected, or by what means. The curate turned from the conversation that led to the subject uppermost in her mind; and all she could gather was, that he had met Blakeborough before, under circumstances not agreeable to recall. He might have tried to wean him from his dissolute ways, she thought, and been rebuked with harsh and scornful words; perhaps he had assisted him, and had met with ingratitude. Her guesses were all at fault; and she walked by his side, still harping on the subject nearest to her thoughts, yet, for all her pains, as doubting and unsatisfied as ever.

They reached the cottage at last. The squire's bailiff and his man were busy counting over the pieces of furniture Dame Pullen had had in her possession since the day she was married, and grumbled at finding so little to pay the rent with, so the treasured pig and poultry must go as well. The old sow squeaked and grunted, the fowls cackled and flew wild as the strange visitors attempted to seize them in their hands, or hunted them about; while the men murmured in the midst

of the poor woman's distress, and said the squire would swear at them for not turning her out before. In vain she told them how the rent was got ready, but had been lost—she did not say her husband had stolen it; they only laughed at this, and told her to hide her money next time, and keep it out of harm's way. Say what she would, do what she could, it was all the same to them. "The squire wanted his rent, and she must pay it, or they should sell her up."

In the midst of all this harass and confusion, Florence and the new curate lifted the easy latch of the cottage door and walked in. A few words sufficed to tell the tale of the poor woman's sufferings and the squire's orders, which the men were busy in carrying into effect. Aided by her father's bounty, and the few small sums she had been able to collect, to assist her in her charitable object, Florence had obtained sufficient money to meet the bailiff's claim, which was quickly discharged.

And while the poor woman sobbed out her gratitude in thanks and prayers, Florence tried to comfort and cheer her on in hopes of better times, while the curate whispered words of comfort too, and soothed her into thinking more calmly over her past sorrows, and of the relief

that had come to her. Pullen was not there, either to take part in her distress or assist her in her troubles. His wife had not seen him since he robbed her of the small store she had provided; and he was now at hide and seek from the consequence of the over-night's violence.

Finding she was in ignorance of the share he had had in it, or of his nefarious practices, they remained silent on the subject, and let her have her joy uninterrupted by the pain the intelligence would have caused her.

Meanwhile the bailiff and his follower left the cottage amidst the groans and cries of the villagers, who had assembled round the place, sympathizing with the poor woman, but unable to do more than sympathize. To assist her was out of their power. They stood shaking their heads, thinking of the hard times they should have to go through, now the young squire had come to the estate: going back, in their rough untutored way, to the old times, to the old squire, and the helping hand of his gentle wife. This was all over now; and no mercy was to be hoped for from their new master, who had commenced by selling his land, and would sell them up as well, house and home, so long as he could get what he wanted, and go on as he had begun.

As they thus stood and talked—the old folks dreaming over the recollection of the past, the younger men and women giving utterance to low murmurs and complaints of what honest people had to suffer, when landlords neglected their estates, and oppressed their tenants—a sudden cry was raised, and those nearest to the cause drew back in terror, when they saw Dick Coombs rush madly down the path leading to the cottage, his white hair streaming wildly about his head, stained and dabbled with his blood, and with the step as of a drunken man, come staggering on, crushing in his hand a sheet of paper, which he held aloft, as he made his way through those who tried to stop him, breaking from their outstretched arms, and dashing onward, his eyes wild and wandering, his uneven steps neither turning to the right hand nor to the left, but making straight before him to the door of Pullen's cottage.

A dozen voices asked in a breath, "What was the matter?" But Dick broke through the throng, shouted to them to "stand back," and dashing in at the doorway of the house, left them on the outside bewildered by his desperate manner, and confounded at his sudden and unlooked-for appearance.

Something unusual they saw had happened to



distract the old man, and send him raging up and down. At first they thought he had come hunting for Ned Pullen, but his haggard face, his pale distracted look, soon drove that thought away, and made them wonder what could have chanced to madden him, to make him roll his eyes in the way he did, or rush along the road with a crushed-up paper in his hand, and burst into the cottage of Dame Pullen in the way he had done.

But they soon knew the reason of the altered manner of the old gamekeeper, and heard his story with mingled rage and grief. And when the old man went upon his way again, the neighbours and familiar friends stepped softly on one side to let him pass; or with a silent shake of the outstretched hand, and a downcast look, let him go by without a word. They knew his ways of old; and though all the village had heard of Martin Blakeborough and his daughter Nelly, no one had ever dared to speak to him about it, for he was jealous of his good name, and loved his child too well to hear her lightly spoken of, if he could help it. What had happened to Dick Coombs might happen to themselves, if their girls went sweethearting with their betters, as the gamekeeper's daughter had done; and while they felt for his misfortunes, they determined to profit by

the lesson, and keep their daughters—if they could—out of harm's way. The news of what had come to him made the stoutest tremble, when they thought of the old man's grief, and what he had suffered.

Stunned and bleeding from the over-night's affray, with a deep wound gashed upon his head by the butt end of Pullen's gun, Coombs had gone home to his cottage in the Quell, and staggering to the hearth had tried to bathe his head, and rest himself from the struggles of the night. He would not wake Nelly—no! the girl was always frightened at the sight of blood, and so he'd let her rest. He had done his duty to the squire, ill as he deserved it at his hands—that was a consolation. But the old gamekeeper vowed vengeance on Ned Pullen for the part he had taken, and the blow he had given. He knew him well enough—the moon shone full on his face as he tried to grapple with him—when the giant stepped back and felled him like an ox with his clubbed gun. He knew the rest of them, too—knew them to a man; and whilst he took the master's pay, Dick was too honest to neglect his trust.

He laid upon the bench and tried to rest his aching head; but on the edge of the table laid a sheet of paper. His eyes did nothing else but

look at it, and as the light from the embers on the hearth fell upon it, he wondered how it came there. He fell asleep at last, worn out and tired.

He slept, but in his dreams the paper came again. At times he thought it was a winding-sheet, and that he was laid out, ready to be wrapped in it. Then it changed into the edging of a pall. His Nell was in her coffin, and he had hold of the pall, and pulled at it with all his strength to draw it off; yet it would not come, although he seemed to tug at it with all his might and main. At length he dreamt it came off as he pulled, when it turned into her small white hand instead, which he held in his, then slept in peace, and laid with it as he thought, pressing on his aching head.

At last he awoke. Daylight had come, and his humble room was lit with the broad glare of morning. But the fire was out, his limbs were cramped and chilled, while his head ached with racking pain. Yet there the paper laid, as if to haunt him! He stretched his hand and drew it to him, and when he looked more closely at it, saw it was stained, as though something had been wiped away from it, while in places the sheet was cockled, as if water had been spilt on it. There was writing on it too, but that he could not read, so he called his daughter to read it for him.

He called; but there was no answer. She must be up, and if so, why was not the fire lighted? She had found him asleep, perhaps, and not wishing to disturb him, was busy in the garden. He called again. No! she was not in the garden, nor was her hat upon the peg it always hung on! Where could she be? Where was Nelly?

His head had been bleeding while he slept, and the hard cushion he had placed to form his pillow was wet with blood. He felt giddy when he rose and looked outside the cottage, but Nelly was not to be seen, so he called again, and opened her room door to wake her. She was not there either. With a bewildered stare he glanced first into her room, then into the one he had left, wondering where she could be gone to; walked into the lane and stood looking up and down for some time, and so went back again into her bedroom.

He still held the sheet of paper in his hand, and grasped and crumpled it as he looked upon the bed, and saw she had not slept in it. Some one had lain *upon* it, but not *in* it, for the clothes were not displaced. And as he looked, the old man's eyes became fixed, his mouth opened, and his jaw fell down, while his brows contracted over

his starting eyes, as the fearful thought came to him, that his daughter had run away! Her hat and cloak were gone! Could she—could Nelly have run away?

He rushed into the outer chamber, thinking to satisfy his doubts, and on the table saw something shining. Guineas! nine guineas! There they lay close on the spot where he had found the sheet of paper. He smoothed it with his trembling hands, then stared again at what was written, wondering what it all could mean.

Something at the bottom of the page looked like “Nelly.” He had often seen her write her name before, and the hot tears welled to his eyes, blinding him, as he looked, and looked again. Then rushing from the cottage with a fearful groan, tore wildly down the lane, and as he went half shrieked, half panted out for “Nelly! Nelly!”

She did not hear him. The letter *had* reached him, and she *was* miles away.

The farm labourers passing on the road gazed at him with wondering eyes, but the game-keeper took no notice of them. He only saw his child flying before him; and as he ran, he grasped the paper in his hand, and clutched the guineas he had scrambled from the table in the other. Wildly he staggered on, and with but one

thought in his mind, went towards the curate's cottage.

He was not within ; so that poor father still ran on, hoping to find some one who could read his daughter's letter to him. He would not have parted with it now for all the world, but kept it in his hand, pressing it against his breast, for fear it should be torn by the wild briars he struggled through, as he made short cuts, broke through fences, or leaped ditches, to come at what he sought. Florence was away as well—gone to Ned Pullen's, to the man who had struck him down ; so without pausing, on he ran to seek her out.

And when he found her he fell, rather than sank upon a seat, and stretched before him the paper he had treasured with such jealous care. He had no breath to speak his wish, but his quiet motion told it for him, as he held the letter at arm's-length for them to read.

The curate took it, glanced his eye over the writing, then let his hand fall down, and sighed.

It was enough. His silence was as eloquent to Dick, as though he had read it word for word. The old man felt the truth of what he had feared. Nell *had* run away !

Or, was it worse ? Had she written to say

she would make away with herself? Anything was better than the terror which now fell upon him like a palsy, making his strong limbs shake and tremble as he gasped out, "What does she say?"

So the curate read—

"DEAR FATHER,—When this letter comes to you, I shall be miles away, where no one can find me. I cannot stay to be a burden and a shame to you any longer. I have done what I ought not to do; but I have prayed, as you told me, to be forgiven, and I hope I am. Oh, if you only knew how I have been tempted, and how cruelly I have been cast off by *him*, you would forgive me too, at least I hope so, for I have nothing left to live for, but Heaven's forgiveness and yours. I can't stay here, father, and you will be happier when I am gone."

Thus far the curate read, when Dick Coombs's white face made him pause and look at *him*, not at the letter he was reading.

Dick bowed his head, then, slowly raising his face towards the curate, said, "Go on."

"Do not follow me, father, for you cannot find me. I shall hide myself away; and live, I hope, to repent what I have done. No one knows of

what I do ; and yet I thought of it when you blessed me just now ; and when I watched you go out, I felt it was the last time I should ever see your dear face again."

The curate paused, for the paper was blurred and blotted here with tears. Florence and the old dame wept too, but neither spoke. The curate read on—

"I am going by myself ; I ought to have gone long ago, and then I should not have brought the disgrace I have upon you ; but you will forgive me now for that, and all, for I will never sin in the way I have done again. Good-bye, father dear—good-bye, and may God bless you, as prays your unhappy daughter,

"NELLY.

"P.S. I have kissed the paper here '[a + stood on the spot] a thousand times."

The old man kissed it too ; kissed it till the paper was wetted with *his* tears as well ; and, spite of all the comfort they tried to give him, groaned and wept by turns.

But a change soon came upon him. He placed the paper in his breast ; then, rising from his seat, called Heaven's vengeance down on her destroyer. His curse was terrible, and, despite the



curate's expostulation, he brought it to a close ; then rushed out again, vowing the squire had carried Nelly off, and had made her write the letter only to drive him mad. Desperate in his hate, and with blood-shot eyes, he ran out of the house, deaf to entreaty and furious in his wrath.

Fearing some fatal outbreak from the game-keeper's excited feelings, the curate attempted to hold him back, but Coombs broke from his grasp, and, with muttered curses on his lips, went raging onwards towards Chase House.

## CHAPTER XII.

### TO LONDON.

THE clatter of horses' hoofs had hardly died away, as Martin Blakeborough and his friend, Captain Nicholas Upton, rode on their way to London, when Dick Coombs strode into the courtyard of Chase House, and with his iron fist beat at the door of the old mansion.

The unusual summons called up the servants from their morning's laziness to listen to what the new comer had to say ; while Lucas, lounging at the far end of the hall, stood with his eyes wide open, hoping he should gather something that would take from the dull monotony of his time, and that the loud knocking at the door might bring some comfort to him, in the shape of positive excitement, to rouse him from his lethargy.

That excitement was not long coming. Dick Coombs burst in at the open door, and asked to see the squire.

The squire ! and what could the likes of him

want with the squire? The squire would have turned him over to the hounds had he been there; but he wasn't, worse luck. He had gone to London with his friend the Captain, and he might have seen their horses, if he had only looked, at a sharp gallop over the hill.

It was all plain enough to Dick. She had been sent beforehand, and her seducer was following after, to meet her away from her father's roof, away from the village talk. And would he suffer it? would he stand by and see his child stolen from him by a trick like this? He told the gaping servants he would not, and cursed their master in their hearing over and over again. He spat upon the threshold, called Lucas savage names as he stood jeering at him, and when he called his daughter by some foul name, struck him down with his clenched fist, told him he lied, and wished—oh, how he wished!—he had his master there, to strike and tell the truth to as well. But he was gone, gone after her whom he had tempted from her father's cot. And while the old man stormed at them and all within the house, he took the guineas one by one from his closed hand, and with the other flung them down upon the pavement of the hall, told them to pick them up and give them back to him—to him who

sent them, thinking to buy his daughter from him with such devil's wages.

Foaming, yet impotent in his rage, he stood for a few moments scraping his feet upon the hall stones, as if to shake the dust of his allegiance off, then cursing Martin Blakeborough and his race, rushed out again, climbed up the steep ascent of the precipitous hill, and standing on the top looked down upon Chase House, doubled his fist at it, and vowed to be revenged.

He might yet reach Haslemere before they did, at all events he'd try, when he would pull the squire off his horse, and trample on him as he laid beneath his feet. There were no bounds to his wild rage and foaming indignation, as he wished he could have met him face to face upon that barren moor with no one but themselves in the midst of it, he would have taught him what it was to steal his child away.

Across that desolate and uneven waste he took his way, and tramped on through heath and furze towards a solitary fir-tree growing on the far side of Blackdown Hill, little thinking, as he crossed an intersecting path, *whose* foot had trodden it some hours before. Nelly had run along that very path—run swiftly on, and so across the moor, whence she struck into the road; that road she

never was to tread again, while her poor father now was hurrying on upon the very path her tiny feet had scarcely left their print on.

He crossed the moor, passed by the solitary tree, and diving through a dense and tangled copse, leaped and clambered on, until he arrived at Haslemere.

And all the time he had not felt fatigue; but strengthened by his hatred and his love had hastened on forgetful of all things in the hope of finding his daughter. But now at last his limbs grew weak, and his knees trembled—why, he hardly knew, as he inquired of the people of the “White Horse” “if they had seen his daughter Nelly go through the town?”

No! no one had seen her; no one had passed but the squire and a gentleman with him, that they were quite sure of. The old man dropped upon the wooden bench outside the door, sick and ill with his restless seeking after his child.

And yet, when all within that inn were fast asleep, a girl *had* passed along, and had sat upon the very bench her father was now resting on! Upon that very spot poor Nelly rested; and with the first peep of morning, hurried on upon her weary way.

The ostler and all about the house knew Dick

Coombs, had known him for years as an honest, truthful man; and when the landlady heard who was sitting on the bench, his bare and bloody head resting against the wall, she came herself, and asked Dick Coombs to come in and warm himself by the fire.

Dick shook and trembled as he sat, the while he felt a burning heat all over him, and his poor head beat and throbbed again as he leant it against the cold stone of the house, and found a comfort from the chill it gave.

“Are you ill, Coombs?” asked the landlady; “and what brings you here at this time of the day?”

“Have you seen her?” inquired Coombs, with anxious expectation. He thought all the world must know of Nelly’s flight.

“Her! who?”

“My Nell to be sure. Have you seen her?”

“No; not these six months, and if what I hear’s true, don’t want.”

Dick waited for no more. He rose from the wooden bench, unwilling to receive even so poor a benefit as the offered shelter from one who could speak ill of his daughter.

But the landlady was too quick for him. Her womanly instincts informed her at a glance what the old man thought, and laying hold of his arm,

she dragged him coaxingly into the house, sat him beside the fire, drew a mug of ale, and made him drink it up, praising all the while his daughter's pretty face—"and no wonder, with such a well-looking father to her back. There was not a finer couple in the county than Dick and his wife had been—she vowed it—and always said so when handsome couples were spoken of. Had she not seen them a hundred times together, and hadn't his pretty daughter often ridden into Haslemere in the same chaise with the old lady, who was dead now—more's the pity!—from the house. Of course she had! and Dick must be proud of her after all."

Here Dick groaned, and with difficulty swallowed a few mouthfuls of the food she placed before him.

"What's the matter with your head, Dick?" She saw there was something in Dick's manner and his haggard face more than she dared to ask the cause of; so she played about, and called his attention off to what she could see her way more clearly to, leaving Coombs to tell the other at his own time. "Who's broken your head, Dick; and how came you by a blow like that? There, never mind, you have no need to tell, I know all about it; Master Pullen has been at his tricks again, I hear;

and if he don't mind, the gallows will square accounts with him some day. Here, Nan,"—a strapping wench came at her call—"bring a piece of linen to bind poor Coombs's head with; he's hurt, and the air is bad for a green wound." And while the careful landlady bound his head, Dick sat and let her do it like a truant schoolboy.

At last the truth came out—Nelly had run away, and he was on his road to seek her. Ostler, chambermaid, every one the landlady could summon, were called. No one had seen her, she had not passed by the "White Horse," at least not as they know'd on; so Dick staggered to his legs again, and said he would follow her to London—the squire had gone there he knew, and where else should she go?

Persuasion was of little use with a man bent on his purpose as he was; therefore the landlady gave up the point, and let him have his way. "But he had come away without his hat and without money too, she'd be bound; and did he think to get to London without money in his pocket?" said she, slipping some shillings in his pocket, and putting a slouched and easy hat upon his head. "If he would go, he could manage better now, and the money could be repaid when his pigs were fit to kill. She did not want it even then; but if it



must be paid at all, she could wait till the squire gave him his wages ; any time would do for her.”

Dick started on his road again ; while the landlady watched him on his way, wiped her eyes with her apron, then went into the bar again, to have a good cry of it.

His rest had given him strength ; and Coombs plodded at a determined pace, thinking he could walk, and never grow tired until he reached the Tower and St. Paul’s. Let him once get there, he’d find her fast enough ; any one would tell him where his Nelly was, for a stranger was always known in his parts. Poor man ! he little knew the wide-spread streets of London, or the huge town that could swallow all his village up, and he not be able to find a trace of it. How then could he hope to find his erring child ? But he *did* hope ; so let him hope on.

He passed the Beeches and along the broken road walked sturdily on his way ; and when he saw the print of horses’ hoofs newly impressed in the soft earth, followed like an avenging spirit on the track of his arch enemy. If he only had him in sight, he felt how he could run him down, and that his swift horse would be no match for him. And so for a mile or two he walked, beating his breast, and thinking of his Nelly.

He halted for a moment by the roadside, as he saw a horse and cart come clattering on from Haslemere, and moved out of the way to let it pass, when John Bushell reined in Dobbin, and seeing Coombs standing there, told him to get up, and he would give him a lift as far as Godalming.

Here was horse for horse ; and as the wheels of the cart spun round, Dick communicated to the honest maltster his sad story, which Bushell pretended not to have heard a word of before, but let him talk, and ease his mind, and never once informed him how the landlady of the "White Horse" had asked him to pick the old man up, if he saw him on the road, and help him on a bit.

They drove at last out of the red, sandy thoroughfare, and came to the junction of the two roads, where Upton had paused, tossed his guinea, and struck on to the heath. Through Milford into Godalming, Dobbin went rattling on, until the maltster turned him into the gateway of the "King's Arms," and ordered bread and cheese, and a mug of ale.

Thus far on the way, Dick ate heartily, and hoped he might catch the horseman up, or overtake his Nelly, although no one had seen her go

by the "King's Arms," any more than they had seen her pass the "White Horse," at Haslemere.

With a hearty shake of the hand, the maltster wished him "good-bye," hoped he might find his girl, slipped a crown-piece into his pocket, then drove to where he was going, leaving Dick to trudge his weary way to London.

No sooner was Bushell fairly out of sight than Coombs started to his feet, and plodding on, arrived, at the end of four miles, at Guildford, where he asked, as he had asked before, if any one had seen a girl go by—a girl like his Nelly—but with no better success than he had had before. So away he went again, and never stopped, but full of newly-gathered strength went striding on in hopes of overtaking her. The ride in the maltster's cart had given him a better chance, and with a little time he thought he should be able to walk her down, or learn some tidings of her.

What was that before him? Some half-mile ahead he saw a something red! It looked like Nelly's cloak, and sure enough there was a woman going in the same direction he was following. Was it, could it be his Nelly, his poor, broken-hearted wench, footsore and hungry, flying from her father's home? The old man tried to run, but his jaded limbs refused the task, and pained

him with the jogging motion. He could walk better, faster, he thought than he could run; so on he laboured, shouting and calling to the girl he saw before him.

Straining every nerve, half running, or walking swiftly as he could, he hurried after her, until he came within a hundred yards of the red mantle, when he shouted out his daughter's name, called to her, and begged her to come back to him.

The woman halted at the sound of his voice, turned and looked at him, then went on again without further notice.

It was not Nelly! it was not even like her, though her face was bright enough, and her eyes were sparkling too. With blank and sorrowing disappointment written on his brow, Dick Coombs sighed heavily, stood for a while unnerved, then sank exhausted upon a grassy mound by the way side, and drawing up his legs laid down and rested.

Exhausted by fatigue, or by sorrow even more than by fatigue, poor Dick slept—slept in that chill November air, and never felt the rain fall on his upturned face, or soak into his clothes.

He woke at last from out that fitful slumber, but his limbs were stiff, and his feet felt blistered when he attempted to walk again. The day was shifting into night, and a cold drizzling sleet beat in

his face as he pursued his way, struggling against fatigue, and strengthened only by the hope he felt within him that he should overtake his daughter.

Poor fellow ! he had passed her long ago ! and the old man little knew that, nestling in a shed on the outskirts of the town of Guildford, the poor girl rested, satisfying her hunger with crusts of bread, waiting for the night to come, when she could venture out again, and resume her journey. And as the dusk drew round, and the night grew darker and darker, the timid wanderer stole from her covert, and followed after on the same road her father had gone before. And in that cold drizzling rain they both walked on, little knowing how near they were together, and thus, each thinking of the other, laboured on !

The father now was flying from his child, and she was following him.

There were no stars to light them on their way ; for the dismal pall of night spread overhead, and shut out moon, and stars, and all. A hazy dark opaque shrouded the heavens, and no eye but God's was there to watch them as they toiled along, or sought a shelter from the rain that now poured down, splashing into the

miry road, until it smoked and steamed again, while midnight closed about the earth, and all was dark and lonely.

Throughout that long, long night the father thought of her, as he crouched under the shelter of a wayside barn; and when he heard the rain fall down, drenching and soaking as it fell, wondered if *she* were out in it as well! He dozed and woke by turns; but even in that pitchy darkness, the vision of his child's bright face would come, and all the place be lit with blissful light, as, with sleepless eyes, he stared into the gloom of the empty barn, and thought he saw her standing by him! What was her shame or degradation to him, now he had lost her! He only felt how much he loved her, spite of all her faults, and his big heart beat yearningly towards his repentant girl, as he drew her letter out, and kissed it over and over again.

The pale morning came at length; he could see his way now—the long dreary way, that yet stretched out between himself and London. He bought a loaf of bread from a roadside shop, changed one of the shillings the landlady had put into his pocket, to pay for it, begged a drink of water, then trudged away again with a slow heavy tramp. He hoped less now than he had

done before, but still he tried to hope; and at each long mile he covered, smiled to think how few there were between them, and how soon he should behold her face again! How surprised she would be to see him; and he thought how he would take her home again, and never, never say an unkind word, but love and cherish her to the very last.

He passed through Ripley, and arrived at last at Cobham, asking at inn doors, and of men in carts, if they had seen his daughter on the road. Some shook their heads, and left him without a word, whilst others stopped and talked to him, as they saw the tired man go toiling on, with wet and spattered clothes, journeying to town. No one had seen her—no girl such as he described. So with a dejected air, Dick walked on again, and began fancying she had not gone to London after all.

Strong and sinewy as he was, the gamekeeper felt each added mile tell on him. He had hardly rested since the night before, when he had blessed his Nelly, and told her how to pray. The time that followed it had been a time of struggle and of pain, and ever since, excepting the short sleep he had had upon the bench before the fire, he had been upon his legs hunting about, walking

or running, hoping to find her. He had been staggered, too, by the blow he had received in his skirmish with the poachers; and, overwhelmed by grief, the old man felt his strength give way, and yet he tried to fight against the weakness that came over him. It was but forty-two miles at most from place to place, and a strong man like he was ought to walk it in a day with ease; but he felt he should be a week doing it, as he sat upon a mile-stone, when close to Esher, resting his weary limbs and aching head; he bathed his hands and face in the cool limpid stream that bubbled and rippled at his feet, and thus refreshed, went upon his way. But his legs soon dragged again, and before he could reach Kingston, he was seized with a cold shiver, which made his teeth chatter, while his flesh burnt with a feverish heat, and he felt sick and giddy; so he turned into a wayside ale-house, where he sat dozing for a time over the fire, then slept long and heavily, spite of the coming in and out of clattering feet, or the loud talk of labourers and farming men, who drank and smoked until their mid-day hour was up, then went to work again.

He woke at last, and scolded the woman of the house for not rousing him sooner. But he might have slept all day before she would have



waked him, for he had staggered in with such a weary step, and looked so pale and ill, she thought it charity to let him sleep over the warm fire, and rest his tired limbs beside the hearth.

He turned into the road again, and cut a stick from a hedge to help him on with. He walked better now, and did not shiver so much as he had done ; so, after all, the woman was right, perhaps, although he blamed her still when he thought of the time he had lost sleeping over the fire. It would be dark before he reached London, and how should he find his Nelly then ?

The long miles crept by him as he journeyed on, and, passing Kingston Bottom, came to the bold archer "Robin Hood," and the "Bald Faced Stag ;" a little further he stood upon high ground, and climbing up a bank, saw in the distance a smoky haze, and someone told him it was London ! Yes ! he could see it now—and there the dome of famous St. Paul's loomed high above the smoke. He could see it plain enough. Nelly could see it too, he thought, and he went struggling and plodding on again, thinking each step would place him nearer to her.

At last he arrived at Putney Hill, and there again was London, spreading and stretching far away into the distance, though the smoke above

it had grown thicker and more dense, and he could not see St. Paul's. The short November day was gathering in its light, and he blamed the careful woman once again for letting him sleep as she had done, so long and lazily by the fire.

Putney and its pleasant lanes at length were passed; he hardly looked at the old village as he limped along, then got at last to Fulham, with its scattered and old-fashioned houses on the other side of the bridge—he never thought of them—that was not London! and he had yet seven long miles to go before he could reach St. Paul's.

The church clocks about St. Martin's and the Strand struck nine. The busy shops were closed, or faintly illumined by ill-trimmed, straggling lamps, that like so many dim red eyes twinkled up and down, when an old solitary man, leaning on his stick, walked heavily along, staring about him with bewildered looks, dazzled and confounded by what he heard and saw.

He had the appearance of a countryman, and the clay upon his boots reached almost to his ankles, while his leggings were patched and daubed with it as well. He had evidently walked from a long distance, and his jaded, care-worn face was pale and wan, as it turned first to the right, then to the left, as if in search of some-

thing. At times he dragged himself along, or stood gaping in at open doors, or at the windows of some house of entertainment, as though he were walking in a dream; or passing onwards with slow pausing steps, saw the streets cross and recross each other, and then go on again as if without an end, until he became fairly puzzled, and hardly knew whether he was standing on his head or on his heels.

The watchmen held their lanterns up and looked at him as he limped and toiled along, and "Past ten o'clock!" sounded strangely in his ears.

He spoke to one of them, and asked him what to do.

The man pointed with his finger to an open door, from which the light fell glimmering on the pavement, when Dick Coombs, worn and exhausted by his journey, went in and asked for a lodging.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE JEW.

THE squire had been some days in London, but his servants were not surprised at that. He was often days and weeks away, and no one ever heard what he did there, although strange rumours went abroad that he still pursued his former doings, and gamed and betted in the same old haunts he used to frequent; sometimes for a whole month he would stay away, and storm the place down if all were not in readiness for the reception of himself and the friends he brought with him. But this time he had gone to town in other company, and Lucas put his finger to his nose, as he told his fellow-servants they would see something, and no good, come out of it, for his master's new friend was no gentleman. Lucas ought to have known; his town education had enlightened him to proper judgment of what a gentleman ought to be—and Captain Nicholas Upton!—but never mind, time and Lucas would show! And as he talked, his fellow-servants gathered round to listen to his tales of

lord and lady, wondering how so great a man could condescend to shave and dress anything under a king.

The squire had written to Hengist Hall, and the day before a letter, sealed with his crest, was put into Mr. Dormer's letter-bag by the post-master at Haslemere, and when the old man read it, he shook his head and laid it on the table. His eye twinkled at the first, perhaps, when he read an offer of marriage for his daughter—an offer, through which his blood might be enriched by some of the oldest in the land; but when he thought of what the squire was, and what his daughter thought of his wild doings, he shook his head again, and gave it to her to read as well.

And when she read it she was as pale as ashes, but her father soon restored her to herself again, took the letter from her, and smiling, asked her to play him a good old English tune upon the harpsichord.

She chose the oldest she could find, and charmed him back to the ancient days he loved to talk of, as she played upon her instrument "Summer is a comin' in," or some other ditty almost as old and strange as that.

The letter was replied to coldly; and the squire's offer, although courteously acknowledged,

declined in an epistle written in an old-fashioned hand, and spelt as our Sidneys and Spensers spelt. Florence saw him write the letter, and kissed her father as she smiled again, and watched, and waited on him with loving duty.

The missive, sealed with a signet-ring—a pure antique—and bound round with a piece of silk, was duly forwarded to London; the postman eyed the letter, turned and twisted it about, as something he had never seen before, and cautioned the waiter at the “Angel” how he handled it, as it was evidently something of importance, “and most likely came from foreign parts.”

The waiter gave the letter to the squire, who sat over his late breakfast wondering, as the postman had done before him, at the strange packet he delivered.

Blakeborough read it with a frown, then threw the letter on the table, as his friend, Captain Nicholas Upton, came into the room.

“Your plan won’t do,” said Blakeborough, “the old man would rather not, although, of course, ‘he is much obliged by my offer.’ Not so much as I should have been had he thought better of it, and accepted me for his son-in-law.”

“Your friend the curate has had a hand in it, perhaps; but your chance is not over for all that.

When you go back, you can make up to the girl, and come to a right understanding with her. Why, what a cramped and antiquated hand the old man writes—spelt, too, for all the world, as our great-grandfathers spelt.” Upton looked, and looked at it again, spread the letter out, then folding it up, said, “He’d keep it as a curiosity, if Martin did not want it.”

“Not I,” replied his friend. “I only wanted the old gentleman’s consent—had I once had him in black and white, I could have taken it to old Clam, and obtained the money I wanted. He knows him well enough, and what he is worth. With such a father-in-law to my back, neither Jew nor lawyer would shut his purse against me—as it is, I must think of some other plan to help me, and at once.”

“The luck has been dead against us,” said the Captain, stretching himself upon his chair; “but luck can’t be good or bad for ever. That last run of hazard cleared me out, and my five hundred went to keep company with yours.”

“Why did you tempt me to play with it? That five hundred guineas would have kept the old Jew quiet. But you always tempted me, and I am rightly served, for listening to you.”

“Haven’t I lost as well?” said Upton, “but I don’t turn round on you, and say you set me the

example, now it is gone. Your only chance, and you know it, was in a lucky main—you could have snapped your fingers in old Clam's face then, and paid Isaacs off; but now you are in the Jew's clutches, he'll hold you fast enough, and come upon you for what you owe him."

"I had hoped to have paid him his interest with the thousand I received for the sale of the Manor Farm, but you stepped in and took your half of it, the other was of no use."

"And so you ventured, hoping to double it. Mine slipped through my fingers as well, but what of that? We can't always win. That Baxter had the devil's luck and his own too. Besides, you owed him a hundred, so it's not so bad after all," said Upton.

"And the old Jew six thousand, what with his mortgage, bills, and interest. And how am I to stop his mouth, which swallows fifty out of every hundred he lends? If I don't pay old Clam his bills as well, with sixty per cent. for each renewal, he and the Jew between them will foreclose with their mortgage and claim forfeiture of my land; so the estate will all melt in the long run, or be sold for a quarter its value to this pair of money-mongers."

"Not it, if you only keep a sharp look out.



Why not sell half the estate at once, pay the Jew and lawyer off, then sit down and live in peace upon the other? It is honest and good advice I give you. For myself, I must take my chance as I can. My loss is worse than yours. I have nothing to fall back upon as you have, Martin, and shall swing for it if I stay here much longer, unless the colonies want peopling and they wish strong men like myself to be transplanted to them. But that's a mercy not likely to fall to me if I am taken." For all his jaunty indifferent air at other times, Upton's brow grew clouded as he spoke with serious earnestness of what was likely enough to come to him.

"Let us get out of this infernal hole," cried Blakeborough, pushing back his chair, and rising from the table. "I am sick of the close streets and the smoke of London, but anything is better than sitting stewed up here, so let us go."

"It is the safest place after all for me," said Upton, "now they are off the scent, unless some one should split upon me, and betray me for the sake of so much blood-money. But I must run my chance of that. None of our own lot will play me such a trick, for fear of what might happen to themselves some day. Besides you know 'honour among thieves' is a maxim we lay

next our hearts, and never bring in question. I only live in fear of one man, and I don't mean to give him a chance if I can help it."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Your Israelitish friend, old Isaacs. I *borrowed* some money of him once, and he never had it back again—that's all."

"And he——"

"Would hang me if he could catch me," continued Upton; "and where is the Jew money-lender who would not, if he could get the value of your old clothes for his pains? But I don't mean to fall in his way, or cultivate the acquaintance of a Bow Street runner if I can help it; so I always keep a good look-out for fear of meeting a friend I would rather *not* shake hands with, and as the weather is cold I keep my muffler up, up to my eyes almost. I can't afford to blind *them*, but keep them wide awake for fear of the worst."

As they left the gateway of the inn, Upton fastened his muffler round his chin and kept looking up and down with a quick eager glance, and then went on, leading his friend through crooked turnings and back ways, anxiously avoiding the more general thoroughfares. Glancing about he saw a girl standing by a street post, looking up and down with a bewildered and abstracted air. Her

cloak was gone, her new red cloak her father had watched for on the road, and Nelly's face was pale and care-worn in the midst of that dull, gloomy street.

With a sudden motion Upton linked his arm within his friend's, and turning a sharp angle, drew him up a narrow passage leading through Clare Market into Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Once within that square, where the noble patriot was beheaded, Upton said he'd "leave the squire to call upon old Clam, while he would wait for him until he came out."

They walked together to the entrance of one of the houses on the west side of the square, and when Blakeborough mounted the staircase, he felt he would rather have gone into the midst of that wide green and fought, as in his father's days they fought and killed in duels, than stand the fierce encounter of his lawyer's tongue. He knocked, when a sharp, weazen-faced old man opened the office-door. "Mr. Clam was not within, he expected him soon, and when he came," the clerk said, "he would tell him who had called."

Blakeborough felt relieved, even by that brief respite, as though a heavy weight were taken from his heart. Springing down the stairs, he

ran into the open air, forgetting how soon he had promised to return, to walk up that wide staircase once again, and again knock at the office door as he had done just now.

The instant Blakeborough crossed the threshold of the lawyer's house, Upton slunk beneath an old archway passing from Lincoln's Inn Fields into the back slums of Drury Lane, over which arch the house itself was built, forming a portion of one side of the square, and boasting no less an authority for its style and architecture than Inigo Jones; to whom nearly all the west side of the square may trace its parentage, and acknowledge him for its illustrious designer.

Keeping well within its shadow, Upton held a careful watch upon all comers passing either by the way of the square, or from the precincts of Drury Lane, with the praiseworthy resolution of running no unnecessary hazard by presenting himself too forcibly, or in too conspicuous a light, upon the passengers' attention. So successful were his efforts in the latter particular, that Blakeborough had completely lost sight of him when he again descended to the pavement of the square, and had to walk about for a few moments, almost in the dark as to what had become of his friend the Captain; who, leaning with his back

against the wall, so that no one could take him at a disadvantage, by getting behind him, suddenly became aware of the presence of Blakeborough, pacing up and down, like some distempered and unquiet spirit.

Old Clam was out, and would be for an hour; so it was speedily resolved between the two friends, as they once more met, to go to Isaacs. There was time enough, and to spare; and as Blakeborough was particularly anxious to know what he might expect at the hands of that polite and most agreeable individual, he left himself to the guidance of the Captain, who had hitherto availed himself of his local knowledge of that part of town most satisfactorily, and might, for anything Blakeborough objected to the contrary, pursue it still, by taking him the most direct route towards his dearly loved and most desirable friend, the Jew.

Leading his friend—he had always led him—Upton crossed the corner of the square and thence into Chancery Lane. Striking across that hive of many Clams, he led his companion down Cursitor Street, and through the narrow court twisting out of it at the far end, called Grey-stoke Place, where in later times Thistlewood and his companions met to mature their plans.

They were now in Fetter Lane, and turning down Trinity Church Passage, Upton dodged through narrow streets and winding ways, until he got into Gough Square and so into Bolt Court, passing by the house where the great lexicographer had so lately lived that his death was still fresh in the recollection of all thinking men.

Pausing in the shadow of the court, the Captain pointed with his finger across Fleet Street towards Whitefriars, and directed Blakeborough the way to old Isaacs. He had been the road often before and could not miss it, so had the Captain too; but he said "he'd stay where he was this time, and wait his coming back."

Drawing his wrapper over his mouth, Upton dived into the court again, telling Blakeborough "he would find him somewhere up there when he came back from his friend, the Jew."

Blakeborough nodded, crossed the road, and walked along the narrow street leading to the river. Turning to the right hand, he came to the purlieus of the Temple, and there, in a crooked dirty alley, up two pair of stairs, Isaacs lay in wait, like an old spider in his web, for whosoever might come and fall into his snare.

There was a close, fetid smell about the house

as Blakeborough set his foot upon the narrow stair, and his boots went creaking up, and up, to where the old Jew sat in his room.

Isaacs heard the creak upon the stairs, when a sudden knocking at the door made the old man turn his eyes—and sharp and piercing eyes they were—upon the full-blown fly who ventured near him. Blakeborough went in, and as he did so, the old man hustled some bags and papers into the desk at which he sat. There was a heavy chink within as he closed and locked the lid, then twisting round on his high stool, said, “Ah! Mr. Martin, is that you?”

Blakeborough had not seen him for a year or more, but he had not forgotten the sallow, dirty, face of that old man, who sat looking at him, huddled upon a stool before a wooden desk of some three feet square. And on that sloping lid men had signed their hopes away, while he had stood watching the pen they guided with a lustful, gloating eye, as though all his love were centered in the gain it brought, and he could count the guineas in his palm with every stroke they made. His hair had always been gray and grizzled—at least Martin had always seen it so; his beard was crisped and crinkled too, covering his long chin with small unsightly curls, rugged and

bristled, like so much bent and twisted horse-hair. But he looked grayer now than he had done before, his room was dirtier, too, and the chimney smoked more; though the wonder was how so much smoke could come from the few cinders smouldering in the grate, sending their smoke and dust as well into that musty and full-flavoured room.

"Vell, Mr. Martin, have you brought the money?" "Money" he always began and ended with.

Mr. Martin had not brought the money, and had come to say so.

"Very vell, then you knows the rest," said Isaacs. "I am not going to wait no longer."

Martin thought he would not, yet still he tried to beg for time to pay it in.

"Pay! you are a pretty von to pay—ain't you? You are always a going but never does, and I am not a going to be made a fool of no more."

The old man struck his hand savagely upon the desk, and again there came a chink of gold, which he heard sooner than Blakeborough, and huddled closer over it, like an old hen would spread herself over her chickens.

Martin knew well enough what to expect, but hoping to drive the evil day of reckoning off,



said he'd sell him part of his land to pay himself with, "if he'd only give a price."

"A price!" cried Isaacs, "how do you expect me to give a price? Vere am I to get the money from, or how am I to live vithout vot you owes me? No! no! it's the money I vant, and the money I'll have, or I'll come down upon you vith my mortgage, and take the land vithout *paying* for it."

The old Jew-spider looked upon the fly he had caught in such a pretty trap, and chuckled like an old gray ape.

"If it must be so, it must, but there are other mouths to feed beside yours. Old Clam will have his mouthful, too, I expect. I owe him money as well; so you see you had better wait, and I will pay you part in a week or two."

"I can't vait no longer, and vot's more, I von't!" screamed Isaacs. "As to Mr. Clam and his bills, ve can settle that matter between us—we are used to it; and if that's all, ve can go snacks, and live like a couple of good old elders upon the land as you sold for a mess of pottage."

"It's all I have had; for you and Clam between you have consumed my rents as fast as they were got in, and eaten up my crops. There's not an acre you have not had the yield of, nor a sheep

you have not had the shearing of to pay your rascally interest with."

"Who was the greatest sheep to borrow the money, then?"

The Jew finding he had his clutch upon the land, did not think it worth his while to coax and wheedle now. He knew Mr. Martin could not pay, and that he and Clam could swallow all between them. So he showed his teeth and grinned a nasty grin, tugging at the grizzly hair under his chin, and the harder he tugged the better it seemed to please him.

Blakeborough stormed and swore at him, and said, "Old Clam had been the first to send him to him, and a pretty send it was! Between you you have cheated, fleeced me, eaten me up with interest and law expenses, and now at last you would turn me out of house and land, and all for what? not a sixth part of what the estate is worth." He told Isaacs to beware how he tried to swindle him, "cheat and liar that he was, for he would not submit to it, he would put his affairs into other hands, and let law fight with law, and Jew with Jew; he'd put Chase House, and all that belonged to it, up to auction, he would, before such a couple of vampires should draw his substance from him."

“Oh! you talks very fine,” said the Jew, “about putting the estate up to auction, but I von’t give you the trouble. I’ll do it for you, and if you don’t pay me the money at once, I’ll bring my papers down with me this day veek—I gave you proper varning six months ago—and serve your tenants with notice to pay their rents to me. I’ll take possession of the estate, in right of my mortgage, and put it up to auction on my own account; so you see you von’t have much to do with it.”

“You old thief of a Jew!” cried Blakeborough, “with your fifty per cent! dare you talk in this way to me?”

“Vy don’t you pay me vot you owes me then?” retorted Isaacs; “a fine squire like you, and not call names, because I vants my own. I have lost enough, I think, and have been kept out of my money by von sham and another, till I’m sick on it. And now I say I *vill* have it! You say I *shan’t*, but ve’ll see about that, ve’ll see, ven it comes to the push, ven I brings my mortgage and bills for interest. I’ll bring them down in my hand this day veek, I vill, as I am a live man now, and shake you out of your house with it, I vill, for all your big looks!”

His hand was raised as if to strike his desk

again. But he let it fall gently down, and there was no chink of gold in that miserable smoky room.

“Mind what you are about, Isaacs, and don’t drive me into something desperate ; keep a civil tongue in your head, or I may throttle you where you sit, and who’s to bring the mortgage deed down then ?”

Half frightened, yet half bullying still, the Jew kept his eye upon Blakeborough, while he dived his hand inside his desk, and appeared to grasp the handle of a knife. “ You vere civil enough ven you wanted me. I vasn’t a thief and a liar then ; but now you have had my money, and gambled it away, you calls me names, and tries to frighten me, only you can’t. You are not the first as ’as tried it ; there’s a friend of yours as did it vunce. I only vish I had him now—that’s all !” The muscles of the Jew’s hand tightened over the handle of the knife, as he went on with a savage grin—“ I’d make him pay for it ; but I can’t, vorse luck ; he’s too vide awake for me, and never gives a chance of catching him—and my arm’s not long enough to drag him over from France. I only vish it vas. I knows some one else would like to catch him too, for a little job you *may* have heerd on.”

Blakeborough felt what the old Jew meant,

and whom he talked of ; but he looked him coldly in the face. "What do you mean, and what may I have *heerd on*?" said he, mocking him as he sat.

"Oh ! nothing—it was a friend of some von else's, p'rhaps—and a pretty friend he vos to any man ! Oh ! he vos a nice boy, and wrote a pretty hand—half a dozen, ven he tried ; but he did not sign your mortgage though—no, no ! I vos not such a fool ! but he did a few bills vith somebody else's name, and very like it vos ; at least, the constable said so, ven he saw the vons he gave me, for as much as I chose to lend on them—dog and damn'd thief that he vos—and got my money out of me, out of a hard-vorking, poor old Jew ; and ven I vent to get them paid, the cheat had been found out two days before—only two days—and so I lost my chance. As if the rascal couldn't have dated them a little earlier."

"Oh ! I know what you mean," said Blakeborough ; "but that's an old story."

"I thought you would remember," replied the Jew ; "it made a great stir at the time ; but I always took your part, so did Clam, who is a very kind man, ven you knows him. Ve said ve know'd you better ; you could never be a friend of such a thief as that—oh, no, not you !—you

vere a gentlemans, and had land of your own; at least, you would have ven your father died—that *ve* know'd vell enough; and you couldn't have know'd a thief and forger like Nic Upton! Oh! quite impossible, vasn't it?"

Here the old Jew screwed his mouth, and shot his cunning eye into Blakeborough's face, tugging at the hair under his chin, and winking at him all the while as fast as he could.

Blakeborough, for all his resolution, winced under the old man's gaze, when he remembered with whom he had walked along the streets, and who had led him almost within sight of the Jew's house. But he had other business to attend to now, and urged Isaacs over and over again to wait, but to no use. Isaacs would have his money, or that day week he would bring his mortgage down, and sell him up, "unless he came to terms."

"Terms! What terms?" replied Blakeborough.

"Vy, ready money, to be sure—they's the only terms I knows on—principal and interest as vell, or vith vot old Clam and he could do—they know'd how to do it vell enough—they'd put the place up for sale, and buy it in at their own price—that is, if he could borrow the money to pay for it. You vont mistake the day, vill

you, Mr. Martin? It's this day week, you know, and not a hour later."

Finding all his efforts fruitless, and the Jew bent upon his plunder, Blakeborough turned, with a nervous beating of his heart, out of the room, and left old Isaacs sitting at his desk, while the small fire blew out a cloud of smoky dust, almost blinding him as he went away, his boots creaking down the narrow stairs again.

He had nearly reached the bottom of the staircase, when old Isaacs put his head over the railing, and with his hand arched over his mouth, called after him, "Good-bye, Mr. Martin. You'll excuse my coming down, wont you? I shall see you this day week, you know; you wont forget it, vill you?"

And that day week old Clam and Isaacs would be there, he thought, to stop his tenants' rents, and make a seizure on his house and land. They would shut him out, even from his mother's room.

The Jew's words sounded in his ears as he went staggering through the narrow streets, and he heard nothing but—"This day week."

## CHAPTER XIV.

### LINCOLN'S INN.

UP and down the court, into Gough Square, then back again, walked Captain Nicholas Upton. Tired at last with idling about, awaiting Blakeborough's return, he retraced his steps into Fetter Lane through the narrow streets by which he had brought his friend, hoping to while away the time until he should come back from old Isaacs.

Wondering what kept Blakeborough so long, he drew his muffler up and turned again towards Fleet Street. He had reached the outer end of the court when he met a man face to face, who stopped and looked at him as though he recognized, spite of the muffler, some one he had seen before. Upton tried to look another way, though he still swaggered at the entrance of the court, but without advancing nearer to the man, in whose face he did not dare to look again, for he felt his eyes were fixed upon him. Twisting on his heel he walked slowly back, listening as he went if any footstep came behind him, turning



round when he reached the other end of the court, hoping the man was gone ; but no, he was still there, and still staring after him.

The court twisted sharply to the right ; and slipping round the corner, Upton ran with all his speed into Gough Square, where he slunk within the open doorway of a house, as a hasty footstep came hurrying down the court, following the way he had taken. With the door turned back upon its hinges, Upton looked through the long crack, and saw the man hurry by in full chase after him.

He watched the runner pass, and forgetful of old acquaintanceship, let him go on without a word ; then hastening back threaded his way into Shoe Lane, and never ceased running, glancing keenly and anxiously about him all the while, until he reached Fleet Market, and crossing over through a labyrinth of huckster's stalls, cabbages, and heaps of offal, directed his course into Bear Alley, up Breakneck Steps, along Green Arbour Court to the top of the Old Bailey, and so into Smithfield. Here he paused from his swift speed, but only for a moment, and to be assured he had not been followed, then mixing with the crowd passed out of sight.

The man meanwhile went chasing up and down until he arrived at the entrance to Fetter

Lane, where he came to a full stop, and remained staring about him in a perfect state of bother and confusion, wondering where, in the name of Fortune, his much-desired friend could have gone to. Puffing and blowing from the unusual speed he had been indulging in, and sweltering with heat, he unbuttoned his great coat, threw the lappets wide open, then tore back again on the same fruitless errand, his drab skirts flying like sails behind him, and his top-boots beating the pavement like a dray-horse.

Men, women, children—every one he met was asked, and in the same breathless way, “if they had seen a tall man with a muffler tied about his neck?” and with the like ill-success. But if anyone had asked if they had seen a distracted runner, the question had been more easily disposed of, more especially by the little ragged boy he came full pelt against, and tumbling over, fell at full length, like a spread-out brown eagle, his top boots and leathers sprawling on the ground.

But though a dozen or more had seen the runner, no one had seen the mysterious and departed muffler, nor the man who owned it; so dodging first up one court, then another, and with as much speed as he could put into his by

no means seven-leagued boots, the disappointed officer still went on, bruised by his fall, and savage with his disappointment. Yet before he quite departed from the chase, or gave up all hope of bagging his valuable head of game, he hid, as well as his great coat would let him, behind a projecting corner in an angle of the court, and for the next three-quarters of an hour laid in wait fully prepared with his staff of office to do immediate execution on the offender, and summon to his aid all true and loyal subjects of his Majesty, King George the Third, in case of any resistance, looked for or expected, on the part of the delinquent, whose muffler he yet hoped to pull away, and pocket for his pains.

He was certain it was the man; as certain as he was of anything out of sight. There were a hundred guineas offered for him, and he would wager every shilling of it—provided he had once arrived at it in ready cash—that the man he saw was no other than Nic Upton; and Mr. Joseph Ketcher would have him yet, or know a reason why.

With the Jew's words ringing in his ears Blakeborough retraced his steps, and through the heart of old Alsatia made his way to the court in which he had left his friend: he was not there!

After walking for some time up and down the same way the officer had run, he came to the conclusion that Upton had gone on to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

He reached old Clam's dwelling, but Upton was not there either ! He looked under Inigo's archway and round the square, but could see nothing of him. Tired with waiting, he mounted the old staircase once again, and knocked at the door. The old clerk opened it, as he had done before, and said "Mr. Clam was engaged, but would speak to him presently."

There Blakeborough sat watching the office clock. He saw the hands climb up from minute on to minute, while the dull ticking of the pendulum came like a deathwatch on his ear, and almost drove him mad. He had waited three-quarters of an hour, when he sent the clerk to tell Mr. Clam he could stay no longer.

Blakeborough knew well enough why he was kept fuming and fretting himself to death ; old Clam had him at his mercy now, and, like a poor needy client, he was left to wait to grow nervous and disheartened, ready to listen to any proposition the lawyer might think fit to make.

After some further fidgeting and delay, he was ushered by the worn-out elderly clerk into an

inner apartment, and to the presence of Mr. Clam, who was, however, so busily occupied over his papers, he did not seem to be aware of any interruption on the part of Blakeborough, or that he was standing there looking at him, and eyeing him with a look of unutterable contempt.

How much longer this looking on the one part, and the silence on the other, might have continued, lawyers and poor clients can alone determine; but before many minutes had elapsed Blakeborough broke on the abstracted studies of the attorney, by saying sharply, and in no very gentle tone of voice, "How much longer am I to wait, I should like to know, scraping my heels and dancing attendance in your office? You are mighty busy all of a sudden, Mr. Clam."

Mr. Clam put down his pen, and rising from his chair begged Squire Blakeborough to be seated, then sank back again, quite prepared to hear what he had to say.

Unlike old Isaacs, Mr. Clam was cleanly shaved, but his face had a tinge of parchment in it, and there was a hard, stony expression about his eyes, which looked everywhere but in the eyes of the person he addressed; while his thin, shapeless lips were pressed together until the edges almost met in a pale, bloodless line.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, squire, but I am so much pressed for money, I was casting about to see where I could get some, and am glad you have called, according to promise, to help me at a push.” The thin lips closed again, while he fixed his eyes on the bookcase over Blakeborough’s shoulder, who stammered out—

“I am sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Clam.”

“I am still more sorry to hear it for your own sake,” said the lawyer, without, however, taking his eyes from the bookcase; “since I am grieved to say it is quite out of my power to help you. I have given you time, as you know, when I could, though I have had to borrow money for my own exigencies to assist you, but now——”

“You must do it again,” cried Blakeborough, with an earnest look towards the lawyer; “choose your own terms, only something must be done, and instantly, to save me from old Isaacs.”

“He is a hard man, I know,” replied Mr. Clam; “a very hard man, and if it were in my power——”

“It is,” interrupted Blakeborough, “and I must make it worth your while to take the whole affair out of his hands, or I am ruined—hopelessly ruined! You know how matters stand between us, and while he thinks he has me in his power——”

“Thinks ! my dear Mr. Martin, he *has*.”

“Perhaps so ; but you must get me out of his clutches—you can manage him better than I can ; he’ll listen to you.”

“Not he, my dear sir ; besides, when I first introduced you to him, and he advanced what you required upon certain terms, I took upon myself to promise you would be punctual in your engagements.”

“It is all very fine to say punctual, but what am I to do, and how am I to help myself when, between you, you have used up all my means, paying you the frightful interest I have done ?”

“Money, my dear squire, must be paid for,” said the lawyer, shaking his head despondingly.

“At least I have always had to pay for it, and have already repaid you and that infernal Jew more than you ever lent. I have other engagements beside yours to provide for, and have had unlucky runs of late, and not been able to help myself ; and now, what with interest and interest again added to that, on renewed bills, and the devil knows what, you have got me in a pretty mess between you.”

“You are unjust, Mr. Martin ; I am only answerable for my own transactions ; Isaacs acts quite independently of me, I assure you ; though in this particular matter, to a certain extent, we

have mutual interests to protect, and unfortunately he holds a mortgage on your estate as security for money lent, at what interest I cannot pretend to say."

"Oh! that's easily settled—the same as your own," said Blakeborough, with a sneering smile.

"Sixty per cent! well, that's not too much when you take the risk into consideration, and if young men will borrow money before they get their land——"

"They must expect to lose it *when* they get it, I suppose you mean. That is what old Isaacs threatens me with."

"I am sorry to hear it, for I know he always keeps his word in these matters."

The lawyer shook his head again, and looked intently over Blakeborough's other shoulder, at a bust placed against the wall.

"I'll hunt him off the ground if he once puts his Jewish foot upon it. I had but two thousand pounds in all, and now he has mounted it up to six!"

"Interest, my dear sir—interest, and expenses."

"Ruinous and monstrous ones! And all because I was fool enough to borrow of you and him. You have fleeced me between you, pigeoned me,



like a dolt that I was, and now you'd pick my bones as well. But you shan't if I can help it, or you can help me out of it. Why not pay old Isaacs off, take the security into your own hands, give me time to sell at a fair price, and so cry quits with you?"

"I, Mr. Martin! I pay six thousand pounds! Do you think me made of money, or that I have a gold mine in my waistcoat pocket?"

"You want to dig one out of my estate, you mean, and will, if you go on this way much longer; yet if you both had your rights, and I had the money in my hand, I'd pay you what I really owe you, and the Jew his two thousand pounds, with proper interest, and not another penny, while there was law to help me."

"But, my dear Mr. Martin, you *haven't* the money, and we hold a mortgage, with power to seize and sell you up—at least, old Isaacs has. I have hardly protected myself at all, whilst he holds security for his debt. I have nothing—positively nothing—beyond a letter or two, and a few bills for what you owe me—but these you have so often renewed, I am at last compelled to say we must come to a settlement of affairs at once."

"And my land at the same time, I suppose.

House and all must go, because I have not time to put it fairly in the market, and get a price for part of it. If you both come upon me, as Isaacs threatens, in a week, I am ruined!"

"I am afraid you are," said Mr. Clam, and for the first time during their interview he smiled, and glanced his eyes at Blakeborough, but met with such a fierce and savage look, he dropped them on the table, and said no more.

"Then I suppose you will come down upon me too, with this Jew thief, come prepared with formal processes to turn me out, and teach him the ready way to do it."

"I must protect my client, more particularly as I introduced you to him, and if Isaacs says he'll come in a week——"

"You'll come as well," interrupted Blakeborough, bursting into a sudden passion, "come with your parchment face to lay your legal claw upon my estate, and serve my tenants with notices to pay their rents to you! You'll drive me, like a fox, from hole to hole, and not leave me enough of my father's land to dig a grave in."

Blakeborough rose, towering over the lawyer, who shrunk within his chair, then left him, and walked out of the room.

The lawyer's eyes twinkled as the other

turned his back; then snatching up a sheet of paper, he wrote a hasty note to Isaacs, telling him to come to him at once, as everything had fallen out just as they wished.

There was no occasion to send to him, Blakeborough met him on the stairs, as he was going down them, and pushed by him without a word.

The Jew did not so easily forget old friends, but called after him—

“You’ll be sure and be at home, Mr. Martin, vont you, and have some breakfast ready for us, after our journey. Ve shall see you this day week, for sartin.”

Shambling up the staircase into lawyer Clam’s room, the Jew sat closeted for an hour or more, while their poor victim went gloomily along the streets, furious in his wrath, when he thought how they had picked and plundered him, and with hasty strides walked on until he came to the “Angel Inn,” behind St. Clement’s in the Strand.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE "ANGEL INN."

UPTON was not at the inn, but a note had come from him. Blakeborough opened it, and read:—

"DEAR M.—I have just escaped a pressing invitation to dine with a friend from Bow Street, but as I did not quite like the quarters he had provided for me, nor the fare he usually gives, I declined the invitation. He was so very pressing, however, I was obliged to take to my heels, and run for it, fortunately getting out of sight. As I know he has several friends who might wish to see me as well, I must keep in close quarters for a time.

"Yours truly,

"P.S.—Burn this.

N. U."

He now knew the reason why Upton had not met him in the court, when he left the Jew. He had been recognized, and forced to seek his safety in flight, and Martin felt he had no one now to tell his griefs to, or ask advice and

counsel from. He threw the paper in the fire, and as he saw it shoot up in a blaze, then crumble into ashes in the grate, he leant his arm upon the mantel-shelf, and hoped Nic would baulk them yet ; for, with all his faults, Blakeborough had a yearning after his college friend he could never quite subdue. He wished him far away, perhaps, away where he could never hear of him, or live in fear of him again, but he would not have harm come to him, if he could help it ; he only wished him away in safety, and for ever.

He still leant upon his elbow, thinking what was best to be done, and how to set about it : but the more he thought the more he became bewildered, indulging in fruitless speculations how to save his land from the clutch of the Jew and lawyer. They had shown themselves at last in their true colours, and had only played with him all this time, as an angler would play with a fish, to take him at last more surely in the net they had spread for him. Had he sufficient time before him, he thought he could do as Upton had advised him—sell a portion of his estate, and with the other live an altered life. But that he had no chance of now ; he knew they would come upon him as they had threatened, and he was wise enough to know they would rob and cheat him

further still, now he had no means of helping himself. If they once came upon his land he was ruined, yet how was he to keep them off?

The carts and vehicles clattering along the Strand gave out a dull monotonous sound, while the hum of noisy traffic coming upon him in the dark room of that old inn, lulled him into a sort of stupor, as he still leant upon his arm, puzzled with doubts, when an unusual shuffling of feet in the passage of the inn, followed by a heavy tread mounting the staircase, roused him from his lethargy. The door was thrown open, and the thick-set man Baxter, followed by two others, came into the room.

"You did not expect to see us, did you, squire?" said Baxter, holding out his hand to Blakeborough. "We had nothing else to do, so we thought we would hunt you up, and drink a bowl of punch at your expense. But where's the Captain—isn't he here?"

"He was," said Blakeborough, with a half sigh, "but——"

"But what? What's up? No harm happened to Nic, I hope? Not nabbed, is he?"

Blakeborough did not reply.

"Hang it, squire!" resumed Baxter, "out with it; we are friends here, and know all about

Nic, and what he's like to come to, if he's caught. What is it?"

"He has had to run for it, I believe; but I don't know the particulars. He sent a note just now, telling me he should be obliged to keep out of the way for a time. Beyond that I know nothing."

"Started the game at last, have they? More's the pity, for with all his faults, Nic had a backbone in him, and while he had, would lend a helping hand to a friend. He has been under a cloud ever since that little job you were mixed up with, squire, two years ago."

"I?" replied Blakeborough, with a lowering brow.

"Oh! I don't mean all through it; but you *were* in it, for all that; we know that well enough. You and Nic were inseparable once, up to any mischief; but ill luck has come upon him, poor fellow, and if I only knew where to lay my hand upon him, I'd do him a good turn, if I could; though I am in the gutter myself just now, and had the devil's ill luck of it last night after you left."

"You had a good run of it while it lasted, and cleaned me out," said Blakeborough. "But one thing I have quite made up my mind to—I'll never throw another main."

"Not till the next time," said Baxter, while his two companions laughed loudly and boisterously.

"I am serious, Jack; serious as a man can be——"

"Who has no money," cried one of them, finishing the sentence in his own way; "and if that don't make a man virtuous, I don't know what will."

"Again I tell you I am serious, Mike. If I had a million in my pocket, I would not risk a single guinea of it on a card or dice. It has brought me to a pretty pass, and I shall lose my estate, and everything I possess, unless I hit upon some scheme or other for saving it."

"Lose your estate! What's up now, squire?" asked Baxter, with a stare.

"Old Clam and Isaacs are going to play me one of their sharking tricks, and unless I get enough ready money to stop their claims, they'll turn me out this day week."

Baxter gave a long whistle, by way of expressing his astonishment, but attempted no reply.

"But as there is a sky above us," resumed Blakeborough, growing white with passion, "I'll burn the house about their ears, before they shall live and fatten in it to my loss."

"Old Clam and Isaacs? You have tumbled into



good hands," said the man they called Mike; a well-made, dashing-looking fellow enough, though, like the rest of the squire's companions, he had a flashy, dissipated appearance. "Oh! I know their ways of old; between them they would ruin an India House director, and think nothing of it. They play into each other's hands like a couple of sharps with a pair of greenhorns, and will pick the flesh off your bones if you only give them a chance."

As they were all friends, and had no secrets between them, Blakeborough gave them a brief outline of his position with the Jew, and informed them how he and the lawyer had threatened to come upon him for forfeiture that day week.

"It is a bad job," said Baxter, "and looks blacker than I thought at first. The worst is, we can't help you, for after you were gone last night, a couple of foreign Counts, as they called themselves, swept the board between them, and pocketed every guinea we had; and as to Mike Garroway here, they'd have taken his fine red coat off his back, only the lace wasn't real. So, you see we are in the same boat with yourself, squire, and be cursed to them and their luck too, or I'd have lent you what I won of you last night, and welcome."

"Thank you, Jack. But this is slow work," said Blakeborough; "we'll have some punch first, and talk afterwards."

And thus they sat, while the three new comers soon forgot their losses in the punch they swallowed, and almost persuaded Blakeborough to borrow money of the landlord of the "Angel," or sell his watch, for them to try their luck with against the two Counts, who had promised them their revenge.

"Revenge! and be hanged to them!" cried Tom Bridgeman. "I should like to take them into Hyde Park, and try long shots with them for what they won of me last night. If I must lose my money, I like to hear it jingle in an English pocket."

As Blakeborough could not be tempted to toss on credit, they chatted over their drink, and turned their conversation again upon Upton.

"I'll bet a hundred to fifty," said Garroway, —still upon credit— "I'll name his place of hiding."

But there were no takers, so Mike offered to waylay the old Jew, and maim him, if Blakeborough would only promise to make it worth his while.

"I owe the old thief a turn for what I have

heard of him, and should glory in paying him out, if the odds were only in my favour."

On that head they were all of one mind, and a variety of schemes were started by which both Jew and lawyer might be pounced upon; but whilst they held the bills, mortgages, and letters, Blakeborough felt they would still be as strong as ever, although with broken heads.

The sharp clatter of horses' hoofs, and the rattling of wheels in the inn yard, made them rise from the table, and look out of the window. The Portsmouth mail was in the yard; the guard and coachman were busy over the various packages to be deposited in the stowage of the coach, while the ostlers gathered round the horses, looking after reins and harness, holding their heads, patting their sleek necks, or stroking their noses.

The stir and bustle was a sight to see; and Blakeborough and his friends walked into the overhanging gallery, running round a portion of the old inn, to observe what was going on, and as they leant over the balustrades, they saw the mail-bags placed in the boot; while four men lifted a heavy box, bound round with iron bands, and deposited it there as well.

"That's bullion," half-whispered Baxter to

his companions, "on its way to Portsmouth, to pay off some ship or other. I wish it was going to pay me off instead."

They did not laugh at this. The sight of the heavy box made them all feel and think alike. Had the contents been Blakeborough's he thought how he should be saved from ruin, how he could pay the Jew and lawyer off, and live an altered man for his life to come.

It was seven o'clock. The passengers stepped inside, while the "outsides" clambered up in front. They saw how the guard was armed, and how he carried pistols and a blunderbuss, to defend his charge over the long, tedious road they had to travel before they could reach Portsmouth. Fourteen long hours at least, and quick travelling too in 1785.

And that day week, Blakeborough thought, Isaacs and Clam would take their seats inside that mail-coach, and with their documents in their hands go down to claim his birthright; and as he looked with savage eyes into the dark recess of that mail-coach, he almost fancied he could see them there already, chuckling and laughing, as they sat side by side.

The passengers were seated, the coachman climbed on his box, the guard swung up behind,

the horse-cloths were pulled away, and the coach rattled out of the yard, lighting the pavement with its bright glowing lamps, set like a pair of eyes to see its way with. The coach crossed the end of Wych Street, jutting almost to a level with the old inn, startling the two tumble-down houses at the corner as from a sleep of bygone times, while the coach went rumbling along, shaking their timbers, and rattling the windows in their frames.

The mail turned round the churchyard of St. Clement Danes, and clattered along the Strand, the passengers in the streets wondering at its unusual speed—full six miles an hour; while the "Flying Machine," for all its wings, went but four.

Blakeborough stood for a time looking after the departing coach, watching it with greedy eyes, and thinking of the treasure it conveyed—speculating within himself of what that gold would do for him, and how the Jew and lawyer yet might travel by it, and seize upon his land. Full of these thoughts, and busy in his own conceits, he turned about with the intention of joining his friends, and of finishing the punch they had left upon the table, when he saw Baxter's eyes fastened on him, with a strange interrogating expres-

sion in them, as if to read his mind, and ask him if he thought as he did.

There they stood looking, but without speaking, each gazing on the other with a kind of mute communication in their eyes, as if to search each other's thoughts, and be possessed of the other's secret wishes. Still neither spoke, but the suggestion was alike in each, however dark and hidden it might be.

They left the gallery, and walking into the room again, called for a second bowl of punch ; another followed that, while drawing their chairs closely round the table, the four men sat talking in subdued whispers among themselves, until St. Clement's Church struck twelve.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### HOME AGAIN.

AND all this time where was Dick Coombs? Searching about, running here and there, hunting for his child! All ways were new to him, and yet through all he went, from morn till night, upon his hopeless errand, to return at last to the mean lodging the watchman had pointed out, as a poor but honest dwelling, kept by a hardworking man and wife, "who would treat him well," he said, "when they saw he was a stranger, and not used to the town ways."

Here he stayed for days, and each one as it came, found him on his aching legs, staggering along, asking and seeking for his Nelly; yet nearer still than when he passed her on the open road, his daughter hid herself, and in a wretched garret in St. Giles's she laid her head upon her truckle bed, but not to sleep. Hunger kept her awake, and as she laid with sleepless open eyes, prayed for that old man's peace and for her own forgiveness. At times she thought she would send

to him, for she was humbled now, and weak from want of food. Her guinea had been stolen from her the first night she got to London, so she parted with her clothes, and sold the best she had about her, one by one, to buy her food and shelter with. She had little left to wrap her tender body in, and the cold damp air made her shiver as she went asking in shops for work, for she was handy with her needle, and hoped to live by that poor drudgery. She could not obtain any, though she tried hard, and even cried to get it; none would trust a half-clad girl, whom no one knew; and so from shop to shop Nelly went, and day by day was sent away again.

At last she left off praying, and began to think of dreadful things. She stood at night upon the bridge, and saw how the dark sad waters glided by without a ripple, twisting as they went into small eddies as though they longed for something to suck down. She threw a pebble in, and when she saw the splash it made wondered if she should go as quickly down, and be as soon forgotten; but that night at least she only threw the pebble in and walked away, thinking how soon it sank, and how the waters closed above it.

But all night long she laid and thought of it,



and huddling on her pallet to keep herself warm, saw nothing but water floating by her. She thought she saw herself struggling on its surface—struggling, but not sinking as the pebble did, until she was cast ashore; and near her, in the river mud, she thought she saw a something lying; dragging herself towards it, she found it was her father—dead, dead, and drowned!

She woke up with a scream. She had gone to sleep thinking of the water, and dreamed the rest. She would not go near the river again she thought, and once more the poor girl prayed to Heaven to shelter and protect her.

She procured a little work next day from some poor neighbour of the woman with whom she lodged. That gave her heart. She began to find her way about better than at first; by degrees the neighbours came to know her, and her pretty care-worn face won her some friends, who helped her on a bit; she grew more cheerful; she slept better than she used to do, and never dreamed of the river again.

Her father had looked into the river too, had stood upon the same bridge wondering if it could tell a tale of her he sought. Find her he could not, though he searched day and night;

and yet but two streets off, by looking from his window over the low house-tops that lay between, he might have seen the lattice of the garret where his Nelly hid herself, shivering with cold, and pinched with hunger.

He had been a week in London, and long and wretched days and nights they were; but on this day he started earlier than usual, and watched the milkwomen bringing in their pails from Islington or Pancras fields, and saw the market carts piled up with vegetables, passing into the close heart of London. All that day until eight o'clock at night he tramped about, up courts and narrow lanes, elbowing through busy thoroughfares and crowded ways, looking with eager eyes for her. Worn out at last, and quite subdued in spirit, the old man traced back his way to his mean lodging, and sank upon the threshold, fainting and ill.

The man and woman of the house carried him to bed between them, and in the sickness that fell upon him watched and waited on him while he laughed and sung by turns, or wept, and called for his daughter to come and sit by him. He was light-headed at times, talked of his cottage in the Quell, and calling Nelly out of the garden, cautioned her against the squire.

The doctor was a skilful man, and Dick's iron frame soon threw off the fever, and sitting up one day, he said he would go home again. But he'd not do as great folks did sometimes, he'd not forget their kindness; and should they ever see his girl—"they could not miss to know her, she was so pretty—they were to keep her there, keep her by main force, if need were, until he came to fetch her home again."

Dick's shillings were all gone; but they lent the old man what little money they could spare, telling him he might return it by the mail-guard who passed nearest to his home. With a heart-felt shake of the hand, and a "God bless you!" the gamekeeper bid his London friends good bye, and walked back upon the same weary road again.

A week had passed, while the peasants dwelling round Dick's cottage wondered at his absence, and drew their own conclusions as to the cause. No one had heard of him since he turned his back upon Chase House, and climbed the hill beyond. The cottage door was open, but the dark window of his room was never lighted as it used to be by the cheerful fire, nor was Nelly or her father seen working in the garden now.

But though the cottage window was dark,

and had been since the hour Dick went away, a kindly neighbour had made all straight within, had set his table out, and piled his fire with turf and wood ready for a blaze. She knew there was no woman's hand to sweep and clean his cottage now, so the good dame did it for him, and made everything smart and tidy against his return.

The morrow and the next day came ; the next to that, but still Dick did not come home ; and the gossips of the village wondered more and more why the old man stayed so long, and tired themselves by guessing whether he would come back at all.

A light was seen at last—a sudden light gleamed from his cottage window, and neighbours gathered in the night to watch the shooting flames starting from the newly-kindled fire. The gamekeeper had returned at last ; that was one comfort, but they would not disturb him now ; they would see him in the morning, try and cheer him up, and do what little things they could to make him happy. They could not bring him back his child though, that was impossible.

Stepping on tiptoe to the window, one of them looked within, and there saw Dick Coombs,

lying with his head upon the table, his arms stretched out before him, and in his hands was a piece of paper, which the woman said looked like a letter. Stealing on tiptoe back again, she went away with the rest of the neighbours, to talk of the old man's return, and hope he would soon come round again.

The next day came, and in the early morning Dick Coombs was seen climbing up the steep that rose behind his cot; he stood upon the top, as Nelly had done before him, looking down on his quiet cottage in the Quell, watching the smoke curl up from lowly-thatched and scattered cottages, hid in nooks and corners. On he went again upon the edge of the steep downs, round which the hunt had come, to the top of Blackdown Hill, and upon the leaden roof and twisted chimneys of Chase House looked darkly down. If he could only have leaped upon it, and with his weight have crushed it, battering and shattering it to pieces, and *he* within as well, he felt how soon he'd jump, falling like a thunderbolt from that high-set hill.

All that day he sat upon the steep and overhanging edge, with his legs dangling down the precipice, watching Chase House like a beast of prey would watch, in hopes of springing at last.

A passer-by tried to persuade him to go home again, and not sit there, but Dick only shook his head, and told him not to mind him. The man asked about his child. Dick did not answer him, but looked upon the house again, shook his fist at it, and wished he had the squire sitting by him, how he would knit his arms round him, how he would drag him down, and fall upon him at the bottom, dashing the life out of him.

It was useless to talk to him ; so the man let him have his way, and told the neighbours round about that Dick Coombs was mad.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE LOOK-OUT.

THERE was an unusual bustle in Chase House ; lights were carried here and there, while servants ran about to get all ready for the squire. He had returned at last from London, with three of his friends, who had come to hunt with him, he said. The thick-set man, Jack Baxter, was one of them, and his flashily over-dressed companion was another, who laughed and shouted at the third man who was with them, when he said, " he was tired, and wanted to go to bed."

" To bed, indeed ! a smart fellow like you, tired with a six hours' ride ! Try a run after a fox, over a rough country ; there'll be some excuse then for shaken bones."

" It's all very well for you, Baxter ; drinking or riding, all's one to you, but I'm not used to it, and what's more, I don't like it any the better for being laughed at," said Tom Bridgeman, rather sulkily.

" Set him at a hazard-table, or with a dice-box

in his hand, Tom will last the best man out, and be as cool and comfortable after a long night's play as the squire or Baxter would be after a fox-hunt. I am something of Tom's way of thinking though, for all that," continued the flashily-dressed Mike Garroway, "a long ride knocks a man up, and no mistake about it."

"All right, Mike; when you have had your dinner you'll be well enough, and Bridgeman too. Then we'll go up to the leads, and cool ourselves after the punch. But, remember, we must keep sober heads to-night, and think of the business we have in hand."

"Of course," cried Baxter, "and there's nothing like punch to make your head clear, at least it always clears mine; after a good dose I can see my way to anything, and do it all the better too."

"Confound your strong drinks, say I," cried Bridgeman, "and punch above all others — it sets my brain spinning like a top; if it had not been for that, the other night, I don't think I should have ventured on this job with you, though now I am in for it, I'll go through with it, never fear; but for all that, confound your punch, I say! Claret, now, is a gentlemanly drink; I can take my bottle like a man, and



feel none the worse next day. It is the only thing to play upon—provided you drink at all—if you want to keep your head clear and your hand steady. Oh, here's dinner, and glad enough I am; I'll play trencher man with the best of you."

Lucas spread the table with a jaunty air, then waited on the squire and his guests, with a condescending grace, and a slow, dignified step, which ought to have convinced them, if it did not, how greatly he had descended from his high position, and only waited as a favour, not as a duty. Standing on one leg behind the squire's chair, he crossed the other over it, looking with all a footman's contempt at the flashy finery of Mike Garroway, as though he thought he ought to change places, and wait on him instead.

Dinner over, Lucas was told to put the punch and wine upon the table; they could wait upon themselves, the squire said, they had business to transact, and Lucas might take his ease in the kitchen.

"And, hark'ee," cried Baxter, "you need not come yourself when we ring, you are so infernally lazy, you'll be all night about it; send that little black-eyed lass up I saw you with when I was here before; you know whom I mean, I dare

say, for you and she were always dodging about in corners, and not over given to company, I noticed."

Baxter laughed loud and boisterously, while his town companions laughed too, much to Lucas's discomfiture, and inquired, "if there were not one a' piece; if so, Lucas was to be sure and send them up," while Garroway pulled at the collar of his flashy coat, and made the most of his frill and ruffles, in anticipation of a pair of black eyes he meant to captivate upon the spot.

Lucas cast a scornful look at Baxter, at his suggested interference with the black-eyed waiting-maid. He had been paying his attentions in that quarter too long to endure this rude attack upon the affections of his fair one, with that stoical indifference he was otherwise so famous for; and had Baxter been a less powerful man, and no more to be dreaded than the flashy Garroway, Lucas felt he could have challenged him to the village green, and demeaned himself by thrashing him within an inch of his life. But Baxter had an ugly look about his deep chest and broad shoulders, and Lucas thought that one blow from that muscular arm might be more than sufficient to stop his career of conquests. So he only looked—but that was something—at his

laughing rival, while he mentally resolved to poison Sally's mind against him—shoulders and all—in the kitchen.

They were alone now, and drawing round the table, the four men commenced a whispered conversation—Blakeborough sitting silent and apart, while Baxter drank deeply of the punch, and Bridgeman sipped his claret. Drawing yet closer round the table, they spoke in lower tones, so low, indeed, Lucas, with his ear at the keyhole, could with difficulty make out one word in ten. Something, as he told Sally, about a “Jew,” and “money,” and a “mail,” or something like the words, but what he could not guess. Could it be they wanted to borrow money of a Jew, and that Sally was to be bail?”

They began talking a little louder, when a slight rustling at the door induced Blakeborough to turn and look towards it. Holding up his hand, by way of caution, he rose, as Upton had done before him, and looked into the passage. No one was there; but he heard a stealthy, creeping step go down, and when he returned into the room, and the sitters spoke again, it was in such low whispers that if Lucas had had both ears to help him at the keyhole, he could not have guessed at a single word they uttered.

Whatever they might have been speaking of, they had evidently quite made up their minds about it, and leant back in their chairs—as much as to say that matter was satisfactorily disposed of.

“So that’s settled,” said Blakeborough, speaking again in his usual tone of voice; “and now we know what we have to do, let us talk no more about it, for there are sharp ears in this house, and such as I am particularly anxious to guard against. The scheme’s a good one, so here’s luck to it!” He filled a bumper as he spoke, and even Bridgeman took his glass off at a draught, while each of the four men wished “success” to their undertaking, and promised to be true to one another.

The punch had made them feverish and hot, and as the squire loved fresh air, he offered to take them up on to the leads of the house, and show them what an old place he had, and what a fine view, if the moon was up, they would have from the top of it. So up they went, through narrow staircases and ancient rooms, the candle he held to light them with hardly throwing a glimmer around as he led them on through galleries and up twisting steps towards the leads.

Baxter carried a light as well; it was for-

fortunate he did so, for on Blakeborough's opening a door leading to the roof, the sudden draught extinguished the one he held; and when he lit it again they had to shade the candles with their hands, and go along slowly and carefully, as the wind swept by and blew the flickering lights into small blue jets streaming from the wicks, and half inclined to go out altogether.

After a long, tedious ascent, they emerged at last into a large and disused lumber room—the repository of useless furniture, old books, ancient manuscripts, and such like matters as the generation of that particular period took so little heed of, and hardly thought fit for any better service than they were now put to—to fill up some old chest or other; thinking themselves fortunate they were so readily got rid of, until such time as the servants should think it worth their while to light their fires with them.

Tumbled, heaped, and tossed, they lay about in dire confusion; old books, antique missals, early prints, and copies of the rarest price, specimens of loved authors, torn leaves, and costly binding, all jumbled in a mass, and only fit for worms to eat into; stores of unregarded treasure, neglected and abused by the past and present owners of the place, to be picked up, perhaps, at

some much later date, in out-of-the-way corners, or redeemed from dusty holes, to gladden and delight the earnest seekers in the long past with newly discovered scraps of by-gone letters.

Wealth, riches, honours, gathered and counted up, while the riches of the mind, dug from the brains of men, were left to rot and waste themselves away, or if found, found only to supply the wants of some ruthless cook, and leave the new possessor stricken and aghast at all his late discovered treasures wasted and consumed, burnt, or purloined for kitchen use—and his own carelessness the cause.

There had been no occasion to invent or write disguised hands, had parcels such as these been kept with jealous trust, or had the dwellers in old mansions called in wiser men to inspect and con the neglected wisdom mouldering in their garrets, or collect the leaves, spotted with damp, gnawn by the sharp teeth of rats, sharp and biting as the best critic of them all; or from the torn and rotting pile, pick out the priceless gems, to come upon the world, as other stores have come, to enrich the age, and make us marvel at the genius of the past.

Placing the lights within a sheltered nook, Blakeborough, after cautioning them “to mind

their shins," opened a small door clamped with iron nails, which, grating on its rusty hinges, led them up a steep and rugged flight of steps on to the roof.

Here they could talk in peace, and have no other listeners than the choughs and bats, nestling in the chinks of the old walls or whisking round about, startling them as they stood gazing over the turret tops of that old house. He led them on along the sunken way, forming a sort of guttered passage round the four sides of the house, stopping every now and then, to let them peep below between the breaks in the raised parapet, on which they placed their hands gently and nervously, fearing their very weight would make the deep-set stones give way, and send them toppling over. There they stood looking for a while over the wide range of wood looming in the distance, black and dense, or tracing the meadows stretching far away, and melting into the mist beyond.

The night was clear and frosty, while overhead the stars streamed forth their million million rays from out the dark expanse. The moon had not yet risen, and they trod that dimly-lighted roof with fearful caution, dreading lest some hidden gap might send them crashing down, while Blake-

borough walked onward with a confident and undoubting step, urging them to follow. He had no fear, nor ever had, even in his boyhood days, when he had run along that sunken path, or climbing up the sloping roof, sat cross-legged over it, and shouted in his youthful triumph to his trembling mother, walking far below him in the distant garden.

They stood at last facing Blackdown Hill, and, pointing with his finger over its dark brow, Blakeborough told them that was the way they would have to go; but though so high in air, standing, like spectres, on those noiseless leads, they spoke in murmured under-tones again, as each man whispered in the other's ear of something they had got to do.

Mounting some steps, built upon the roof, he led them to a raised "look-out," where, in former times, a watch was kept over the distant country. Glancing over the wide expanse, he said, "And shall the Jew come here, and cheat me out of this? Turn me adrift from a place where I was born, and where all my line have lived before me, and looked below upon the land my ancestors won with their strong right hands; shall he come here, and lay his head within these walls, or look with his ugly eyes on



such a sight as this? If he were only standing here, I'd throw him off, and let him scrape with his dirty nails as much of mine as he shall ever scrape, clinging to the walls he tumbled over."

Suddenly there came a distant glare, a thick and lurid smoke curled up, and then sank down again, while through the distant smoke the flames burst out, leaping like fiery serpents, flashing and raging to the skies.

All eyes were turned to where the distant light appeared, and there a fiery cloud spread far above, while thousand sparks burst out, as from a shell, scattering their glowing particles in the air, and as they burst, broad sheets of flame rushed wildly upward, and shooting far and wide, gave forth a crimson glow, lighting the distant scene with the red light of a conflagration! Blakeborough gnashed his teeth when he looked towards the Quell, and beheld the gamekeeper's cottage one sheet of flame, its burning embers whizzing and darting in the air.

There was a distant cry below of "Fire!" Hoarse murmuring of voices came even to where they stood, as men went crying "Fire! fire!" There were shrieks, too, mingled in those shouts; and as the cries went on, the glowing hill echoed them back again, as though its sides were

startled by the glare that lit them up, and all was "Fire! fire!"

The very roof they trod on seemed red and hot, and as the squire and his companions stood on that high "look-out," the conflagration covered their faces with a bloody hue, as they stared on one another with frightened eyes; while the roaring flames, fed by fresher fuel, leaped and flashed, lapping with fiery tongues the pitch and rosin up, running in their fused and melted state along the blazing timbers of Dick Coombs's cottage.

It was *his* doing the squire knew well enough, and he cursed the old man savagely for the vengeance he had taken. He felt, although he had not been told it, that Dick had burnt his cottage down to be revenged on him, had sublimated by fire the foul and pestilential wrong that clung about it, burning and driving it away before the influence of all-consuming fire. There it stood, a fiery witness of his wrongs; and as the flames streamed forth they appeared to shape themselves into forked, fiery hands, ready to hurl their scorching fury down on him who caused it. The very walls of old Chase House were tinged with crimson, and the distant fire reflected on its encrusted walls a blushing red,

lighting each hole and cranny up in vengeful token of the wrong its owner had done him.

And down those steep and piled steps Blakeborough ran, while the burnt cottage, falling to the ground, gave out a cloud of sparks, as if all its fury had been wasted; while a subdued and deadened smoke rose mounting over it, like incense offered up to the demon of revenge.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE "BELL" AT LIPHOOK.

THE cottage lay a confused and smoking heap, but by the time the embers had cooled down, and spades and pickaxes could be used with safety, the villagers began digging in the smouldering ruin, dragging out half-consumed but still glowing timbers that burnt and scorched their hands; and while some of them searched or dug, others threw pails of water upon the sudden flames that every now and then flashed up, kindling anew the only half-quenched fire. From the first break of day they had worked unceasingly, hoping, yet fearing to come upon the body of Dick Coombs, burnt and charred into a cinder; and, as no one had seen him since the time he sat upon the edge of the hill, looking more like a madman than a sensible gamekeeper, the natural conclusion in their minds was that he had, most probably, gone to his bed before the fire broke out, and been burnt in it, without the possibility of escape.

They came at last to the nook in the front

room, where he used to sleep, but there were no bones, no sign of human remains, and only his clump bedstead battered into a shapeless mass, under the pressure of the fallen roof, and black as charcoal.

But Nelly was away ; he might have slept on her bed, and been suffocated before he could force his way out of the room. No ! all there was charred as well, and not a trace even of bed or bedding could be discovered—nothing but a heap of red-hot ashes, while over them a huge and smouldering beam had crushed down all before it, obliterating even the faintest trace of what had once been there, or of the spot where Nelly once had rested.

It was now pretty evident, even to the most obstinate and unwilling to be convinced of the whole lot, that Dick could not have been in the cottage when the fire broke out, and if so, what had become of him, or by what means had the fire taken place ? The cottage could not have set light to itself—that was as clear as the sun at noonday—clearer perhaps, and a proposition no one was stolid enough to argue against. How, then, had it commenced—by chance or by design ? Had a spark fallen from the hearth and set light to the place ? or had Dick—but that

was only suggested in a whisper—had Dick done it on purpose, and in one of his mad fits burnt himself out of house and home?

From thinking it might be so, they soon arrived at the conclusion that it was so, and, talking among themselves, as if it were a secret not to be breathed or even mentioned, except in the lowest possible key, fearing it might bring trouble on poor Dick; who, after all was to be pitied, and had been driven to do what he had done by ill-usage. The men, of course, told their wives, and they again whispered the secret to other wives in strictest confidence, and so from wives to daughters the secret spread, until there was not a man, woman, or child who was not as well acquainted with the mystery, as if it had been stuck in large letters on the church door at Lurgashall.

It was rather later than usual, for Lucas had had a bad night of it, before he took breakfast up, and stared to see his master sitting by himself. He had covers for four, four cups, four saucers, and four everything, preparatory to four breakfasts. Had Mr. Baxter, Mr. Bridgeman, and the other gentleman—who was no gentleman, and only made a flash-in-the-pan sort of appearance, in a fine red coat with questionable lace, and an unusual and most flaunting display of shirt-front and

ruffles—had neither one or other of them yet come down? or were they airing themselves upon the leads, strutting about with as much consequence as if the place belonged to them, keeping Lucas in a state of most unaccountable surprise, staring at his master, and only half resolved whether to lay the breakfast things or not?

Here was matter for suspicion, and Lucas was quite prepared to meet it half-way—all the way if it came to that, or get before it and drive it like a thing to be come upon by slow degrees, and found out accordingly; the only question in his mind being, whether it were a question at all, or whether their non-appearance had not furnished him with grounds for positive and unmistakable conclusions to be come at—not in his usual round-about way, but at a jump—a jump like a cat would make at a mouse.

But there were other and important considerations to be arrived at, and quite as much to the point he had in view; as to whether or not Mr. Baxter and his two friends had sneaked away without even wishing him good-bye, or handing that necessary and fit return for his personal superintendence of their wants and comforts, which is usually expected and bestowed, on all illustrious footmen who have anything like personal

appearance to recommend them to considerate notice, or enforce their claims on the breeches pockets of all such friends as their masters may choose to invite, or be pronounced "shabby, mean, contemptible, low," or such like expletives as swell to the lips of disappointed menials—not that Lucas could ever be regarded in that light—when baulked and defrauded of their legitimate plunder.

The servants had been sent to bed he knew, and when half awake Lucas fancied he heard footsteps creaking down the stairs; and then he thought, or else he had dreamt it in one of his horrid nightmares, he had heard a clattering of horses early in the morning. He said nothing to the squire though, but commenced laying the table for himself and his three friends.

"There is no one but myself," said Blakeborough, "the other gentlemen have left for town."

Lucas was right. He *had* heard horses in the yard, and told Sally so when he went down stairs. Sally praised her lucky stars, and hoped that dreadful thick-set man would never come again; but if he did, she mentally resolved to have a peep at him, and see what the wretch was like.

"Not he," said Lucas, "he'll not show his



nose here any more. We'll make the house too hot to hold him, or if that wont do I'll give warning. But he knows me now and what I think of him, for though I said nothing, I gave him a look last night he could not forget if he would. But he has gone, and ill luck go with him."

Baxter had gone indeed, but not to London. He and his two companions had ridden off towards Liphook, and as they went along in the gray morning they met a man in a cart who stared at them when they passed by and whipped his horse ; for John Bushell did not like meeting strange horsemen early or late, or, in fact, at any time upon the open road. But he turned and looked at them, and had a good stare at them for all that. The men turned round in their saddles too, and sat looking after him, and when the maltster asked the landlord of the "Hind Head" if he had seen three men go by on horseback, and he said "they had not come that way" he was sorely puzzled, and wondered how they had got upon the other road to Liphook. Perhaps they had come through Haslemere, or perhaps—but it was no affair of his, so Bushell drank his horn of ale, started on his way to Guildford, and forgot all about them.

Baxter and his friends meanwhile rode on to Liphook, put their horses up at the "Bell," and

inquired of the ostler "at what time the Portsmouth coach came through from London?"

"Do you mean the Flying Machine or the Mail, master?" queried the old weather-beaten man, who took their horses into the stable, while Baxter stood chatting with him, and helped to take their bridles off. "The Machine wont be here till the afternoon. We never know 'xactly what time it comes, or what time it starts."

"Yes, yes, I know, but the Mail, man."

"The Mail. Oh, she's mighty fast and drives along nearly six mile an hour, bating hills and stopping on the road to change 'osses. Mail wont be here till two o'clock in the morning."

"It is a long stage between this and Godalming," said Baxter, as he stuck the handle of his heavy riding whip in his pocket, and assisted the old man to take the saddle off his horse. "Twelve miles is a long pull, with such a lumbering drag behind them."

"Oh, they does it easy enough, but when I was a stable boy—I'm ostler now as you see—we had no such journeying in these parts. Men rode horseback more than now, and made parties on the road for company sake, or came by waggon. But matters change as we grow old, and we see odd things, measter. Coaches run like race-horses

now, six miles an hour. What times be come to ! Why, the coach was two days and two nights 'twixt Lon'on and Portsmouth once, and does it now in fourteen hours."

" You have seen strange things in your time, no doubt, and will see stranger if you live. But for all that twelve miles is a long stage for a coach fast or slow," said Baxter, coming back to his old point.

" So it be, measter, so it be ; though if they go on at this rate, I shouldn't wonder if they come not to change 'osses at all."

" Don't give him too much water, man," cried Baxter, hastily. " Throw it over his legs, and let him have a feed of corn instead. He may have sharp work before to-morrow. Three feeds, and corn, do you hear ?"

" I bean't deaf, measter, nor beast neither. He seems to know what you say, as well as I do, and pricks his ears at it. What a chest and quarters he has, surely ! looks strong enough to carry the mail all the way to Portsmouth by himself."

" He is a strong brute enough, used to hard work, and begins to like it, I think."

" Shouldn't wonder," said the ostler, while Baxter stroked and rubbed his horse down.

“’Osses are running out of their senses as well as men in these times. I never know’d the like ; but I suppose it can’t be helped, if the critters tried.”

Baxter saw his horse rubbed down and fed, lending a helping hand at times, and assisting the old man in doing the like duty to his friends’ beasts. Meanwhile Bridgeman and Garroway lounged to the entrance of the yard, where, after a pause, Baxter joined them, and stood talking with them for a few minutes, then went into the inn to breakfast ; and when that was over, they strolled about the town, or walked a little way towards Hind Head. They soon grew tired of that, and, turning into the inn played at cards, and made small bets, “to keep the game alive,” as Bridgeman said.

“If the dice fall well to-night, and we have any luck, I’ll play you double or quits, in hundreds, Jack ; and if those sharking Counts give us a chance again, I’ll try a trick or two, I know, shall make it worth their while. There never was a run of luck like they had, against such knowing ones as ourselves—honest luck, I mean ; and I’d give Nic Upton half the winnings, and find the stakes, to try a night with them. Nic is up to everything, and a match for the best foreign Count that ever lived by cheating.”

"Nic's used to the style of thing, and has tried it too often to be taken in by it ; but it's all up with the Captain now, I'm afraid," cried Baxter, "or this night might have been the making of him. He is worth six of any men I know, at a game like this, and has a clearer head than our whole lot put together, if he had only a little more courage. But he can't be had ; so we must do the best we can without him." And Baxter looked as though he meant to do *his* best, at all events.

"He is a great miss, no doubt," said Garroway, eyeing his laced coat in the dim glass hanging over the chimney-piece, "and not such a bad-looking fellow, when he takes pains to dress himself ; only he never knows how to choose his colours. Nothing like contrast in dress ; that, and a good cut is everything."

"Hang you and your cut, too !" cried Baxter, with a frown. "Mind you don't upset the business we are upon, by thinking too much of yours ; and what's more, make up your mind to spoil your fine coat to-night, unless you wish the worth of a thousand such to slip through your fingers. Ring the bell, will you, and let's have dinner."

Garroway did as he was ordered, with rather a sullen look ; but as he stretched his arm to reach the handle of the bell, he glanced his eyes

over his shoulder with an admiring gaze at his fine red coat, and pulled his crumpled shirt frill out after the approved fashion of the day.

The dinner was good enough—plenty of ham and new-laid eggs, done to a turn, all hissing from the fire ; a piece of salted pork, with a couple of roasted barn-door fowls, came after that, then apple-pudding, all cleanly set upon the table ; and they ate as men do who have nothing else to occupy their attention, sitting and chatting over it, willing to pass the time away, and cause a break in the long dragging day that lay upon their hands. If they had only had money to play for, and dice to throw with, they would not have cared ; but they had no more of the first than sufficed for their expenses on the road ; and as to dice, the landlord had not even seen such things, though he had heard of them often enough. So they played at any game they could, or looked at the glazed pictures on the walls until they came to hate the sight of them, and yet kept looking at them with a vacant stare, then called for a second bowl of punch, while sober Bridgeman sipped his claret, as he had done the night before, until all three of them grew drowsy, and sat nodding in their chairs over the fire in the “ Bell Inn ” at Liphook.

They slept long and heavily—they had had no rest the night before; and when they woke, the room was dark, and the fire nearly out. Baxter rubbed his eyes, and went into the stable to see his horse have his third feed of corn, while his companions stretched and yawned, called for lights, and wished themselves in London. But they'd be there before long, they hoped, and, with their pockets full of guineas, would make up for the time they had lost dozing over the fire.

After a little further time spent in hanging about the yard, or gazing into the streets, the landlord was called to take the reckoning, when Baxter said they would start at once—"they had a good many miles to ride before they got to Portsmouth."

"It is an odd time of night, gentlemen, for riding; why not stay until the morning, and go to Portsmouth then? There are good beds," said the landlord, "at the 'Bell,' and fit for a king to sleep in."

"That won't do for us," rejoined Baxter; "we must push on at once, now our horses are rested; we want to get to Portsmouth if we can by the morning—a ship has just arrived, and we have some friends on board we wish to see." Without more ado Baxter paid their reckoning, and went to look after his horse.

“You had better try my beds, gentlemen,” urged the landlord; “once in them, you’ll never wish yourselves out again. There are no such beds in the county; and the clothes so smell of lavender, you might almost fancy yourself buried in a bush of it. You’ll wish yourselves snoring in them and snugly housed at the ‘Bell’ before you get to Petersfield, or I’m mistaken. It’s a dreary road at night, and bitter cold, over those sheep downs with miles of heath, and in a dark night like this, not over cheerful, I should think.”

“Oh! there are three of us, you know,” cried Baxter, as he returned into the room, laughing at the importunities of the landlord; “so we shan’t be at a loss for company, anyhow.”

“As you please, gentlemen—as you please; it’s no affair of mine; only don’t say I didn’t try to persuade you, that’s all.” Finding all he could say in praise of his beds at the “Bell” insufficient to induce them to try a night in them, the landlord led the way to the stables.

The light in the ostler’s lantern glimmered in the inn-yard, as the unwilling horses were saddled, and led out for their dreary ride. Baxter stood by the side of his, tightening the girth, and seeing that bit and bridle were in order. He knew how much depended on such things,



when a man had a long, perhaps a hard ride before him, and never trusted groom or ostler if he could help it.

The strong horse smelt at the hand that stroked and patted it—snorting, and pawing the ground as it turned its head, following its master with its eyes about the yard; for Baxter, though a brutal rider, who would spur and beat his horse mercilessly, if he had time or distance to make good, used it kindly at all other times, and fed and patted it when it had done its work; but if it had work to do, do it it must, whether it liked it or no, and the horse had come to know it, too.

His companions threw themselves into their saddles, without a word, taking it for granted all was right, while Mike Garroway buttoned his fine coat over his crumpled shirt-frill, and quite forgot the pains he had taken at the glass to smooth it out, and make the most of it. Baxter was already in his saddle, his heavy riding-whip in his hand, while the ostler lighted the three riders out of the gateway into the streets, and stood staring after them, lantern in hand, as he watched the strong horse curvet and prance, then go clattering down the quiet street, while hoods and nightcapped heads pryed over bedroom-curtains, their owners wondering what the noise could be, while the landlord and the

ostler watched them from the corner of the yard, and as they saw the three riders turn on to the London road, the old man held his lantern up, and cried, "I'll be hanged if they havn't taken the wrong way, measter, after all."

"Serve them right, too! They had better have stopped at the 'Bell,' instead of frightening people in their sleep, and keeping honest folks out of our beds, and such beds! But there never were beds like the beds at the 'Bell.'"

Shivering with cold, the landlord slunk within the doorway of his inn, while the old ostler disappeared into some mysterious outhouse, and found his straw, perhaps, the softest bed, after all.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE MAIL.

THE night was very dark, and as Baxter and his companions turned into the road they glanced from side to side, peering into the utter blank of the starless night. The cold damp air blinded them, and the way grew blacker and blacker as they journeyed on. They could not see the road at all, so they let their horses find it for them, moving slowly and almost nervously along, turning their eyes from side to side, watching the hedges, or tall skeleton trees spreading their sombre outline against the sky.

They discerned their way a little more distinctly as they became accustomed to the darkness, and could guide their beasts more surely, as the white rime, clinging to all it fell upon, made the hedges sharp and sparkling, though the road itself was still as dark as ever. They knew they had time enough, and to spare, so they let their horses walk along, and spoke in

earnest but subdued tones, as they rode on towards the "Hind Head."

There came a glimmering of light at last, as the moon rose struggling through the misty night, while a lighter haze spread in the far horizon over which she rose, but there was little else to see, although a less intense and pitchy darkness lay around than when they first set out, but that was all.

They rode a little faster now, trotting up the rising ground leading towards the ale-house, while Baxter cautioned them as they rode by the wayside house "not to talk, but walk their horses up the road as softly as they could." They did not want to wake the landlord up, he might look out of his window, and wonder what they did there at that time of night, although a draught of his good ale would not have come amiss to them as they sat shivering with cold in the damp night air.

They were out of earshot of the landlord now, and once again they trotted up the winding hill, while sloping down on either side lay scattered fir trees, and steep banks overgrown with fern. They gained the higher ground at last, that, winding round the "Devil's Punch Bowl," emerges on to Hind Head Heath. Here they

pulled up, and walked their horses on, circling the very edge of the black hollow gloom that lay beneath.

They could not see the gibbet which Upton had started at the sight of, but they heard the dead man swinging in his chains, while Garroway drew his collar up, for his neck felt cold and numbed when he listened to that mournful grating, coming like a night shriek through the midnight air.

At last they came to a dead halt, when Baxter whistled low and softly. There was a whistle back again, and Garroway shuddered, fancying it was the dead man in his chains who put his bony fingers up and whistled through them, and but for the shame of the thing would have turned his horse and galloped back to Liphook. Another whistle, and another came to that, when Baxter moved on slowly by the sharp curve winding half-way round the dreadful steep; and as he did so, they saw a man masked and on horseback, hiding under the shadow of the rising ground beyond.

After a brief pause, and a few hasty words, the four men rode to where the road looked onward over Hind Head Heath.

It would not do to keep their horses standing,

for the air came across that wide-spread waste more cold and chilling than they had felt it yet. Their very beasts turned their heads away from it, so they walked them up and down, keeping their eyes upon the long straight road, stopping to listen every now and then, Baxter grasping the handle of his heavy riding whip, and the strange horseman shaking the priming of his pistols home to the loaded barrels.

They listened, but nothing came to break that death-like pause. All nature was asleep, as darkness fell upon the earth, and shut her eager senses up. There was no sound. Nothing to break the awful still of that starless night, except the beating of each man's heart, and that came audibly to him, so audibly he fancied the others must have heard it too. But Garroway heard nothing but the gibbet creaking, even when it did not creak at all. The sound was in his ears and he could not shut it out, although he pulled his collar higher up in hopes of keeping it away.

What was that they saw? Did their eyes twinkle with looking so long, or was it a light, a distant speck of light which as they looked vanished, then came again; then split itself in two, looking like two bright specks upon the dis-

tant road? They saw them plainer now, glowing and coming on them like vengeful eyes gleaming through the darkness, as if to warn and caution them to turn away, and leave undone that which they purposed.

With slow and heavy wheels the Portsmouth Mail came on; and as it crossed the dreary Hind Head Heath, the coachman shook himself into his coat, and wished himself well housed and snug in bed. A long and dragging stage it was, so he whipped his flagging horses, and shook the reins to cheer and speed them on. *He* could not afford to sleep; he had other work to do, though the outside passengers nodded as they sat, or slept in peace, enveloped in their thick cloaks and mufflers. The guard was awake, too—wide awake—and kept his blunderbuss ready cocked, and with suspicious eyes looked at everything about him and before him.

The coach came on at last to where the horsemen stood when they first saw the distant lights, and clattering on under the broken hill, passed by the gibbet that still creaked and swayed from side to side. The horses sped along, but as they reached the sharp bend in the road, two horsemen started from a shady nook, and seized their heads. The leaders thus thrown back upon their haunches the

mail was brought to a dead halt, while the horses plunged and kicked, and nearly backed it over the edge of the steep descent, when two fresh horsemen swept round, one on either side, as a deep voice cried out, "Quiet, all of you, or you'll have your throats cut!"

The movement was so sudden, the attack so unexpected, the guard had hardly time to recollect where he was, before the mail was stopped, and lay at the mercy of the four riders, who now gathered round it. Two of them tried to force the boot and plunder its contents, but in the very act of wrenching the fastenings the guard fired at random at them, wounding one of the men, who fell over his horse's neck with a shriek; while the other, a thick-set, brawny man, stood up in his stirrups, and, with a curse, struck the guard upon the head with the handle of his heavy whip, and felled him, stunned and bleeding, back into his seat.

There was no time to think of dead or wounded now. Baxter forced open the boot, dragged out the mail-bags, and ransacked in it for the box he hoped to find; while the strange rider, throwing himself from his saddle, darted to the coach-door just as an old shaking man was stealing from it, clutching a bag of papers in his hand.



Not a word had been spoken after the gruff voice had first called out, startling the passengers from their sleep, who, now aware of the sudden stoppage, sat trembling and powerless in their seats; while the coachman, dreading what was yet to come, tried to lash his horses on, and force the single rider down who stood at their heads, when the man levelled a pistol at him, and swore he'd "blow his brains out if he tried that game again." So the coachman gave it up, yet sat watching for a chance to lash his horses on in spite of him and his pistol too.

The Jew's hand was on the opened door; with one foot advanced he was stealing from the coach, when the tall horseman seized him by the throat and tried to snatch the bag away; but the Jew fought and struggled over it, bit and kicked, and held to it with both hands, as though he'd lose his life rather than part with it. The man threw him on the ground, but Isaacs fought and struggled still, and tried to snatch the mask away, thinking to get a glimpse of his face; but the man held him with an iron grip, and forced him back, then, setting his foot upon his body, wrenched the bag from him, the strings twisting round the old Jew's wrists, cutting and tearing them until he yelled and shrieked with pain. His bag was

gone, yet still the Jew lay scraping with his hands, fighting and cursing on the ground.

The strange rider looked into the coach. There was no one there—no one but an old pale-faced man sitting huddled in a corner. The stranger asked, in a whisper, "How many rode inside?" The man could not speak—he was too frightened for that; so he pointed to himself, and the Jew fighting and howling on the ground.

"Time's up!" cried the deep, husky voice, while throwing the mail-bags over the stranger's horse, Baxter cursed their bad luck, and said, "There was no box after all."

They were all mounted, ready for a start, when the Jew darted at the tall rider, and tried to force him off his horse, clinging and hanging to his legs, while the other tried to beat and strike him down; but Isaacs still clung and struggled on, hoping to snatch his bag away, when, with a sudden movement Baxter drove his horse close to his side, and lifting the Jew by the collar of his coat, threw him into the road almost to the edge of the steep gorge, down which he would have fallen, but, writhing and clinging still, he caught hold of an overhanging branch, and held by it, suspended over the very brink.

Without a moment's pause, the four men gal-

loped away towards Hind Head Heath, one of them with his arm dangling by his side and his head leaning over his horse's neck. There was no blood to be seen, for blood and coat were all of one colour; and poor Mike groaned, while the others held him in his saddle, and told him "to be a man!"

He felt he was; and in his human suffering moaned, and almost fainted with the pain the motion caused him as they rode along.

The gibbet grated still, but Mike could hardly hear it now, for as they rode there came a distant clatter of wheels and horses' hoofs, while through the still night air the guard's horn sounded, as the mail dashed on again upon its road towards Liphook.

Assisting their wounded comrade, two of the men struck across the heath, while the strange rider, waving his hand, darted up the steep brow of the broken hill, spurred his horse over it, and all at once was gone!

END OF VOL. I.















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